

JULY **10-STORY** **DETECTIVE** MAGAZINE **10¢**

10-STORY **DETECTIVE**

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MAGAZINE

10¢



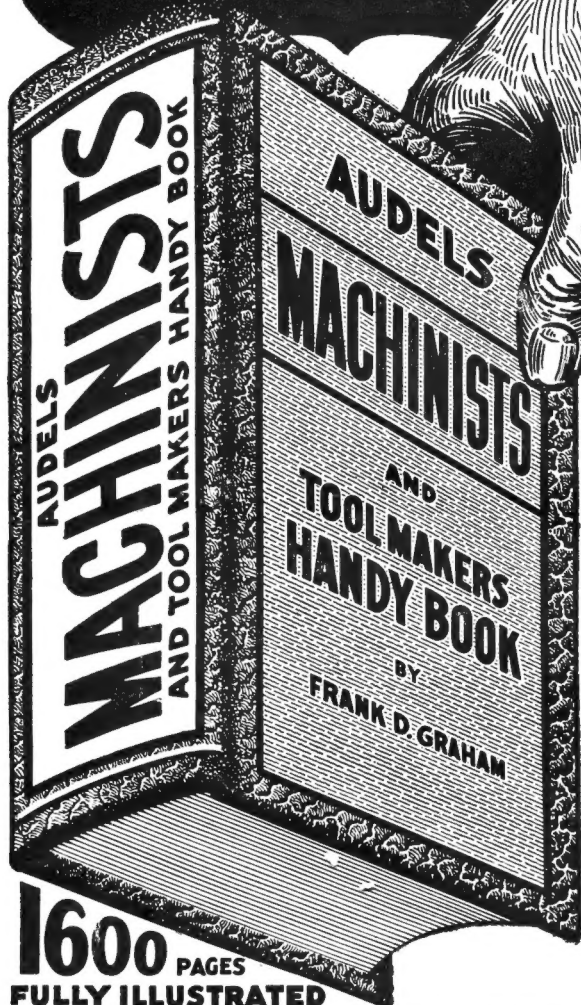
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Vol. VII

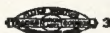
July, 1942

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Cover by Norm Saunders

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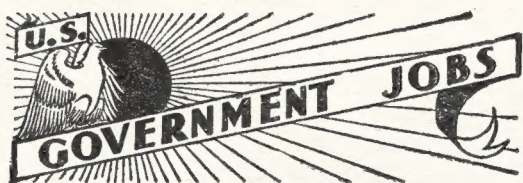
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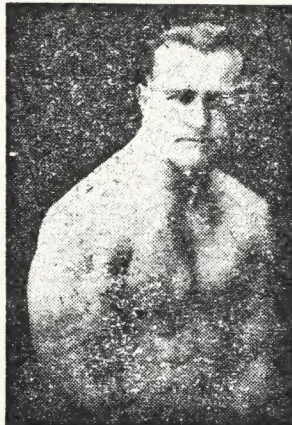
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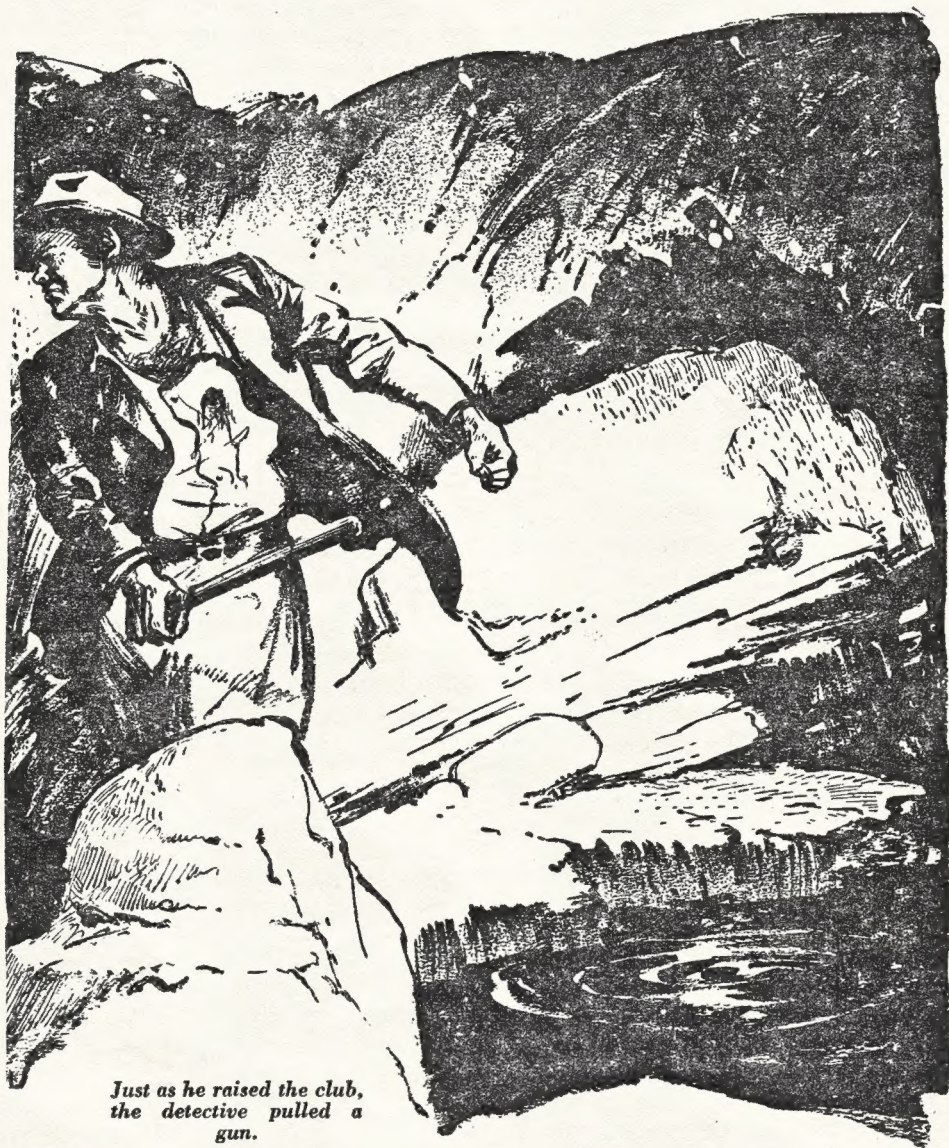
CHAPTER I

GHOST STORM

JIM STUART, detective sergeant, made a wry face and said brusksly into the phone, "I think you're downright crazy, mister."

The voice that answered him was shaky, tense. "Yes—I don't blame you, officer, but I'm telling the truth. At the Michael Kerrigan estate a murder is going to be committed.

In that quiet peaceful town, a murder threat by an unseen hand suddenly promised wholesale destruction. And when Detective Jim Stuart tried to put the cuffs on the mysterious evildoer, he found that headquarters didn't make irons that could shackle an invisible scourge.



Just as he raised the club, the detective pulled a gun.

Perhaps two. I'm repeating myself, but I must make you see reason. There are going to be murders!"

"Who," Stuart asked gently, "is going to murder who?"

"I don't know. There were six of

us. Now only five. Go up there. Don't delay. I'd go, but they'd probably kill me first and I've had enough."

Stuart was still skeptical, although the worried voice was beginning to make an impression on his doubts.

"Look," he said, "I'll make a deal. Give me your name and address, your phone number from where you are calling now. Then I'll know this is not a practical joke and I'll go up."

"Call me back," the man said. "I'm John Alexander. I'm living in a little hotel called the Fairview. Its phone number is 9708. My room is 340."

The connection was closed. Stuart hung up, rubbed his chin and then called the hotel.

"Have you a man registered as John Alexander?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk answered. "Checked in yesterday."

"This is the police," Stuart said. "What kind of a guy is he? Screwball type?"

"Alexander? Hardly. He's about the most serious person I've ever talked to. Has only one arm. The left is missing at the shoulder. Looks like he's been pretty sick."

"All right," Stuart said. "Call him. Say the police phoned and that his request is going to be taken care of at once. Thanks."

Stuart stuffed a thirty-eight service pistol into his hip holster, grabbed his hat and hurried to the desk. The police station wasn't very big because the city it policed had a population of only fifty thousand. Detective Sergeant Jim Stuart was in charge of the detective bureau nights. In fact, he was the detective bureau.

THIS busy industrial town in New England, was on the shore front. Its suburbs consisted mainly of expensive estates, owned by wealthy people from New York and Boston. The Michael Kerrigan place was among the largest, sprawling over a hundred and fifty acres, plenty of which overlooked the sea from a high cliff.

Stuart drove his own car, a heavy coupe. He left the city limits, streaked out along the highway and promised John Alexander, whoever he was, some trouble if this turned out to be

a joke. He started climbing a fairly large hill. The road was wide and smooth here. At the top it would narrow and turn from cement to rougher asphalt. He eased up on the gas when he reached the top.

He didn't hear the crack of the gun, but his windshield was suddenly sporting a neat, round hole. Six inches to the left and that slug would have buried itself in Stuart's brain. He jammed on the brakes and came to a skidding halt.

Jumping out of the car, gun in hand, he looked over the surrounding hillsides for signs of the gunman.

It was a clear night, with plenty of stars, but no moon. Things looked a little weird, especially that object in a small clearing halfway up the sloping bank. It looked like a man—a veritable giant—and it glistened as though it were sheathed in ice.

Stuart stepped back to the car, got in and turned it around until the radiator faced the hill. He snapped on the spotlight, swept the area with its strong, white beam and picked out that object. The detective gave a half-strangled gasp of horror.

It glistened all right, just as ice did. It was huge and it was a human being of sorts, though Stuart had never seen anything quite like it. In the split second before the thing vanished from sight, he noticed that it was encased in some kind of heavy suit and a furred hood, like a parka. High boots were on its feet.

Stuart whipped out his gun, jumped from the car and started up the hillside. For twenty minutes he searched and found nothing, not even a footprint. Then he thought of the mission which brought him here. Maybe this strange business had something to do with John Alexander's warning of murder. Stuart slid and slipped down the hillside, jumped into his car and raced toward the Michael Kerrigan estate.

A row of tall, very old willow trees bordered the whole place, blotting it

out from the road. There was a drive leading into the estate and Stuart's tires protested shrilly as he made the corner too sharp and too fast. He straightened out, jammed the brakes and stopped two feet from a heavy iron gate that barred his path.

He left the car there, found a small gate which wasn't locked and began running along the rest of the drive. The house he knew fairly well. It was a rambling place. The low roar of the surf could be heard clearly. Lights burned in many of the windows. Stuart reached the porch, took the steps in two jumps and jammed his finger against the doorbell.

The door was opened by a tall, hollow-cheeked man with deep-set, pale, colorless eyes. This was Michael Kerrigan.

Stuart showed his badge. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Kerrigan, but headquarters received information that there was some trouble here."

"Trouble?" Kerrigan gaped. "Why—I don't know. Come on in, sergeant. I assure you there is no trouble here that I'm aware of. I have a few friends up from the city. Partners of mine. We've been discussing business."

"Ah," Stuart grunted, "so I've been made a fool of again. Sorry, Mr. Kerrigan, this sounded like the real thing."

"Come in," Kerrigan offered. "I insist upon it. See for yourself."

STUART followed the skinny tower of a man into a huge, knotty-pine lined living room. There were three men seated in comfortable chairs, each one holding a highball glass. Kerrigan made the introductions.

"Boys, this is Sergeant Stuart, one of our local policeman. Stuart, meet Albert Meredith, Gus Gordon and Doug Terry."

Stuart mentally tucked away brain-pictures of the men. Meredith was chunky, red-faced and jolly. Gordon

a slim, pompous, white-haired type. Terry was the mouse of the quartet—small of stature and almost lost in the big chair he half occupied.

"What's a policeman doing here?" Gus Gordon asked bluntly.

Stuart grinned. "Looks like somebody played a trick on all of us," he admitted ruefully. "A man phoned, said there was going to be a murder here tonight. I checked on him—he even gave me his name and address. Said he was John Alexander."

Stuart expected no reaction to the name—a practical joker would have used an alias. But all four men whirled to face him. Doug Terry curled deeper in the chair and looked more frightened. Meredith's fat, red face became grey. Even Gus Gordon's pomposity left him.

"John Alexander?" Kerrigan gasped. "I— Damn it, men, relax. Now we're sure it's a joke. Alexander has been dead for more than a year. He and Leonard were lost in that storm."

"What storm?" Stuart asked quickly.

Kerrigan said, "Fourteen months ago six of us went to Alaska. We were all partners in mining enterprises here in the United States, but we wanted to see if there were any possible developments in Alaska. One day we were at the top of a mountain. A storm came up—rain, not snow, mind you. A wind arose that was so strong it robbed a man of his breath.

"The four of us, whom you see here now, slid down from the exposed heights. But Leonard and Alexander were at the very top of the peak and—well, the wind just swept them over. We looked for them, but they were gone. Buried in the snow, I suppose."

Stuart rubbed his chin. "But if Alexander's body was never recovered, as you have inferred, maybe he did come back. Perhaps he is planning something against you men

out of revenge and was trying to establish an alibi by calling the police."

Fat-faced Albert Meredith seemed to have been thinking along those same lines.

"Yes, that's it. We figured they were dead, but we couldn't be sure. In that terrible storm any man who returned to the peak would either have been swept over, or—or he'd have died because no man could have breathed. The wind was too terrific. Cold—ice—snow—"

Meredith stopped suddenly and cocked his head to one side, like a puppy hearing a strange sound. Everyone froze in his tracks. Stuart heard a soft whooshing sound outside the window. It began to grow until it became a howling wind. A wailing, eerie shriek with every high-pitched note signifying doom. The lights all over the house flickered.

Rain began to beat heavily against the windows of the living room. It sounded as though they'd cave in under the impact. The wind grew stronger. Then the lights went out altogether. But an instant before that happened, Albert Meredith's red face had turned a strange blue and both hands were fumbling with his throat.

Stuart rushed over beside him. Meredith was trying to say something, but only strangled gibberish came from his lips. Then there was a series of choking sounds. Finally his voice came, weak and barely discernible above the now raging storm.

"Can't breathe! Wind—my throat—can't breathe—"

Stuart felt him sag, grabbed him, but it was too late. Meredith's weight pulled him free of Stuart's grip and the body hit the floor with a thump that shook the house.

Almost as though that had been a signal, the lights flashed on and an utter, painful silence held everyone in its grip. The storm had stopped in a matter of a split second.

CHAPTER II

DEAD MAN WALKS

STUART was the first to recover his wits. He knelt beside Meredith and turned him over. The man's face was still blue. There was no heartbeat. He'd died almost instantly.

The detective arose and faced the three stupefied men. "It looks as though John Alexander knew what he was talking about," he said slowly. "Meredith told me, just before he died, that he was unable to breathe. That the wind was strangling him. But the storm was outside the room, not in it. I think Meredith was murdered."

"But good heavens," Kerrigan cried, "why? And by whom was he killed? Not by one of us, sergeant. We're partners—and friends. There wasn't a nicer chap than Meredith."

"I'm only expressing my opinion," Stuart put in curtly. "By some very strange coincidence, Meredith might have died of a heart attack at the height of the storm. I don't know. All of you help me search the estate. We might find that your old, deceased friend John Alexander paid us a visit."

They all started toward the front door except the frightened Doug Terry. He was staring at the body of Meredith as if it fascinated him. He saw Stuart and the others waiting.

"I—I'd rather not go out—there," he gulped. "It—it's bad enough to be in the same room with a dead man. S-somebody stay here with me, please."

Nobody did. Stuart stepped off the porch and grunted in amazement. The cement walk was perfectly dry. He thrust a hand into a heavy bush. The leaves contained no moisture.

"But it did rain," he said in a challenging voice. "All of us couldn't have been crazy."

Stuart hurried to the side of the house where the living room windows gave forth yellow light. They

were high and he couldn't see inside, but the casements were dry. The side of the house was as arid as a desert.

Kerrigan grabbed Stuart's arm. "Wh-what do you think could have happened? Rain—we heard it beating against the windows, but nothing is wet. It couldn't have dried so quickly."

Stuart faced the two of them. "I'll tell you something else, gentlemen. On my way up here somebody fired a shot at me. I also saw a form. It looked like a snowman who'd been slightly melted by the sun and then frozen to a glistening solid surface by a cold night. That form was dressed in a heavy coat, a hood over the head and high boots. Extremely tall—six feet, eight or nine inches, perhaps. Taller than you, Kerrigan, and that's going some."

No one spoke. Stuart stared at them. In the darkness he was unable to see their faces.

"Well," he asked, "do you think I'm doubly crazy?"

"No—no," Gordon answered in a stiff voice. "It—well, it just struck us so forcibly we couldn't talk, I guess. Officer, what you saw wasn't an illusion. There is supposed to be such a being. Eskimos say it's their storm god. He's supposed to be made of snow and ice and he has supernatural powers."

"Supernatural bosh," Stuart grunted. "Let's go inside. I've got to phone for the medical examiner and some help. But I wish I knew what happened to that rain."

Stuart was the first to enter the living room. He saw Doug Terry curled up in the chair, his head hung down on his chest. Stuart looked for Meredith's corpse. It was gone!

The detective leaped toward Terry, grabbed him and shook the man hard. Terry groaned, but didn't wake up.

"He's fainted," Stuart said. "Get some brandy, one of you men. Gordon, you find the brandy. Kerrigan—you know the house so start looking for Meredith's corpse. Hurry!"

WHILE they heard Kerrigan's feet pounding on the floor above. Gordon forced brandy between Terry's lips and finally the little man opened his eyes. For a moment they just seemed startled and then he let out a wild, eerie scream. He pointed at the floor, where Meredith had lain.

"He's gone! I wasn't dreaming! He's gone! Alexander came and took him away."

"Now wait a minute." Stuart pushed him back into the chair. "Calm down, will you? Let's get this straight. Alexander—the man who is supposed to have died in Alaska and who phoned me—came here and took Meredith's corpse away? Where did he take it—in what direction?"

Terry pointed. His arm shook so much that the projecting finger took in half of the blank wall.

"R-right through the wall. Right over there. He came in, but I didn't see him until he stood looking down at Meredith's body. Then he bent down, picked him up and walked through the wall. I—I'm going crazy. I must be. I—"

"Watch him," Stuart told Gordon.

Stuart hurried over to the wall and tapped the whole surface, as high as he could reach. He inspected the rooms on the other side of that wall. There couldn't be a secret passage or hidden panels. He went back to Terry.

"Now talk sense," he snapped. "In the first place, are you sure it was Alexander?"

"Y-yes, I'm positive. He was all bloody and he looked like Meredith. His skin was very white as if he was dead. There was a hole in his left temple. A bullet wound, I'd say. Blood all over his face."

"And bats in Terry's belfry," Gordon whispered in Stuart's ear. "The man is mad."

Stuart took Gordon aside. "Maybe," he admitted slowly. "But what did happen to Meredith's corpse? We were out of the house perhaps eight

or ten minutes. Why in the world should Terry describe Alexander as if he were dead—shot through the head? What about that glistening figure I saw and, most of all, the storm which all of us heard and yet which left no moisture. If Terry is crazy, we all are."

"I think," Gordon said, "a search of this house is in order. A thorough search."

"You're right. Stay with Terry and make sure he doesn't see any more dead men picking up corpses. Tell Kerrigan about it when he comes down. I'm going to start with the cellar, work my way to the attic and when that's over, I'm going to check on John Alexander."

A search of the house revealed nothing. Stuart went to a small study and called police headquarters. He had a detail sent to Alexander's hotel and then he paced the floor while he waited for the return call. He tried to figure out that freak storm, but it was as puzzling as the death of Meredith and the disappearance of his corpse.

Finally the phone rang. Stuart listened intently and his face grew grim. He hung up and walked into the big living room.

TERRY sat in the same chair, huddled up, his chin quivering, his lips forming soundless words. Eyes were bright in terror. They grew even brighter when he saw Stuart. A brandy inhaler stood on a cocktail table beside his chair. He grabbed the brandy and downed it in one gulp.

"I don't know anything," he almost yelled. "About Alexander—what happened to Meredith or anything else. Don't ask me a lot of questions. I'm innocent, I tell you."

Stuart glanced over his shoulder. Gordon and Kerrigan stood in the doorway. The detective straddled a straight-backed chair and looked directly at Terry.

"So you're innocent. For a guy with

nothing on his conscience you certainly got on the defensive fast enough. Terry, you're a rotten liar. You knew that John Alexander was dead—shot through the left temple. You saw him dead—maybe as he was being killed. Perhaps you even shot him, but guilty of his murder or not—you did see his body. Otherwise you couldn't have known about the wound. Speak up, little man. The truth now."

Terry's lips were drawn back in a grimace of sheer terror. His lips and vocal cords worked again, but no sound came forth. Stuart got up, reached down and grabbed him. He pulled the small man to his feet and waved a fist in front of his nose.

"You can talk here or in the privacy of a cell. I don't care which, so make up your mind damned fast."

"I-I haven't any—thing to t-talk about," Terry managed to say. "Alexander was here, in this room. He was a ghost. A ghost, I tell you! D-dead! He's after all of us. He's—"

The lights started to flicker and the low, rustling sound of an approaching storm reached their ears. Terry tore himself loose from Stuart's grip. A window blind banged twice. The wind was beginning to howl. Then, like a cloudburst, rain beat against the windowpanes. A wild, soul-shriveling shriek, made by that howling wind, chilled Stuart to the bone.

Terry began to yell. "No! No! Not me! Please—not—me!"

The lights went out entirely then. Stuart knew just where Terry had been standing and he rushed toward him. Dimly, he saw Terry suddenly grow very erect and claw at his throat. His words became meaningless jumbles and then just strangled sobs. He reeled a couple of steps before he pitched headlong on the floor.

"Air — air — can't breathe. Wind taking my—breath away. Stop it! Stop—"

Those words became a gasping groan and then there was silence.

Stuart fumbled around in the darkness, encountered Terry and at the same time heard Kerrigan and Gordon moving about aimlessly.

Terry's wrist gave no feeling of an active pulse. Stuart ripped his shirt open, pressed an ear against the stilled chest. There was no heartbeat. Terry was dead. Stuart would take an oath to that.

The lights flickered then and Stuart became aware that the storm was dying as suddenly as it had begun. He made a rush for the door, went through it and ran along the wide porch, vaulted the railing and landed just beyond some ornamental bushes. The night was star-filled and serene. Nothing seemed even to have been dampened by that furious rain.

Kerrigan and Gordon yelled to him from the porch. He climbed back and joined them.

"That storm is the damndest thing," he muttered. "If I believed in such things, I'd say it was a ghost storm."

"A ghost what?" Kerrigan asked nervously.

"Nothing," Stuart exclaimed. "What about Terry's corpse? Let's go inside. He might vanish as Meredith did."

"He was lying on the floor when I last saw him," Gordon said. "But I agree. We'd better go in."

Stuart reached the living room first. Somehow, he wasn't stunned by what he saw. He'd rather expected it. Doug Terry's corpse was gone!

CHAPTER III

CAVERN OF DOOM

STUART turned to Kerrigan and Gordon. "This time we didn't even have a ghost who carried away the body. Both of you remained inside after I went out into the storm—or whatever it was. Two minutes elapsed before you both reached the porch. In two minutes you couldn't have disposed of the corpse. There-

fore, I can't blame either of you."

"But what's the answer?" Kerrigan asked.

"It's easy," Stuart said. "Somebody else is on the premises and has a method by which he can slip into the living room in one second, seize the body and remove it. The hiding place must be on the estate somewhere. I'm going to hunt for it."

"Then you don't believe Terry's story of a ghost that stole Meredith's body?" Gordon queried.

"Do you?" Stuart shot back.

"Frankly"—Gordon studied the tips of his fingers—"I don't know what to think. You said Alexander phoned you about seven o'clock. He must have been alive, but Terry was right here at the time and never left the place."

"Then somebody told him how Alexander had been murdered," Stuart said. "The men who investigated described his appearance in death exactly as Terry did. Furthermore, they found out that only one thing was missing from Alexander's room. It was a piece of carved stone. Alexander used it as a paperweight and the room maids saw it."

"The granite god!" Kerrigan gasped. "Sergeant, we all have one of those. We got them during our visit to Alaska."

"Yes," Gordon put in. "We hauled down big samples of rock from the mountain, had it assayed and found it was worthless. The guide we employed, a man named Bates, carved the rock into the form of the Storm God and gave each of us one."

"Is it possible," Stuart asked flatly, "that the analysis you had made was faked? That the sample was worth something and now someone is trying to get those carved idols back before you find out you were tricked?"

"Wait," Kerrigan said. "Mine is upstairs. I'll bring it down."

He returned in a few moments, frowning deeply. "It's very odd," he said. "I saw the stone image not

more than an hour ago, and now it's gone."

"Then it has something to do with all this," Stuart mused. "The fact that it was stolen also goes further to indicate someone else is in or near this house. I'm going to search the estate. Neither of you will leave the house and stay in the same room, will you? I'll be back as soon as I can."

Stuart circled the house and kept one hand glued to the butt of his gun. He examined the garages and found nothing. The car motors were stone cold.

THERE was a small toolhouse far at the rear of the estate and rather close to the cliff against which the surf was methodically pounding. Inside the toolhouse Stuart discovered four bags of cement and a pile of sand. From marks on the floor he knew that two bags of cement had been very recently removed and the sand dug into. Maybe Meredith and Terry had acquired a couple of concrete caskets.

There were several coils of rope, too, and a number of tools. Stuart paid little attention to these. He shut off his flashlight and walked quietly toward the brink of the cliff. Far below he could see the rocky shore. The tide was just beginning to come in.

He lay prone and stuck his head over the edge. About thirty feet below he could see a small ledge. His flash bathed it in light and he knew that behind that ledge was a cave of some sort. He checked the ground where he lay, for footprints, but found none. It was so packed and stony that only the deepest would have been seen anyhow.

The cave intrigued him. There was a perfect spot to hide the two missing bodies. At least it warranted an investigation. Stuart hurried back to the toolhouse, took a coil of rope and returned to the cliff's edge. He tied one end of the rope around a big

rock, lowered the rest of it and saw that it reached beyond the ledge.

After a careful look around, he stuffed the flash into his pocket, took a firm grip on the rope and let himself over the edge. Heights had always bothered him and he resolutely refused to glance down. Foot by foot he descended while sweat poured over his face. If anyone was inside that cave and heard him, a good yank at the rope would send him swinging so violently he'd be bound to lose his grip and fall to certain death.

Then his feet touched the ledge and he gave a sigh of relief. A moment later he was crouched on the ledge, just outside the cave. He drew both gun and flash before he moved inside the intensely dark cavern. His flash cut away some of the darkness and he realized just how large a place it was. Kerrigan's entire house could have fitted into it without much trouble.

Listening, Stuart heard no sound and decided he'd picked a lemon this time. But, having gone this far, he had to investigate as much of the cavern as possible. Step by step he advanced, using his flash all the time. Directly across the huge main room, he saw a smaller opening that led deeper into the cliffside.

Something warned Stuart that he was playing with danger, told him to retreat until more help arrived. There were places here where twenty men could hide with ease. But his gun was comfortably heavy in his fist and the flashlight helped immeasurably, so Stuart kept on going. He reached the opening to another cavern, wriggled through it and found himself in a narrow passage about ten feet long. His flash showed that it led into a smaller cave.

STUART reached the end of the passage, took a single step beyond it and something that felt like a thick club came down on his left wrist. The flashlight was forcibly hurled to the stone floor where it

broke. Stuart was surrounded by intense gloom.

He didn't move, except to draw himself close against the stone wall so that no attack could be made from the rear. He still had his gun, but his left arm was numb to the shoulder. That blow had not been gentle.

Then, as his mouth suddenly went dry, he saw a glittering form gradually emerge from the utter gloom. It was the figure he'd seen on the hillside. It didn't move—just stood there like some menacing ghost.

Stuart didn't hesitate this time. He slowly raised his gun and sighted it. Just about where the glittering man's chest could be, he planned to send a thirty-eight slug. His finger depressed the trigger very slowly because he had an idea that a miss would mean quick death for him. One thing—the glittering man couldn't see through the darkness any better than Stuart because he never moved.

The gun went off with a roar that almost shattered Stuart's eardrums. The explosion echoed and re-echoed through the various chambers of this huge system of caves.

But the glittering man still stood there, as erect as ever. Stuart was positive he hadn't missed, but he fired two more shots, point-blank. He was no novice with a gun, and at the range offered here his target should have been bowled over. Yet the glittering man remained just as he was, stationary and silent. And—Stuart thought with a wave of horror—immortal.

Perhaps he was dead and the body supported by a ledge or other chunk of rock. Stuart started to run across the cavern. The floor was uneven and he nearly tripped a couple of times. The glittering man loomed up larger and larger. Closeness emphasized his vast height. No ordinary man could have tangled with this giant and hoped to escape with his life.

Stuart estimated that he was no more than a dozen yards away from the weirdly glittering form when it

vanished. Not by degrees, but as if a black curtain had been suddenly dropped in front of it. One split second later, two arms wrapped themselves around Stuart's legs and he went down with a thump that knocked the wind out of him. Two hands seized his throat, raised his head and rapped it hard against the stone floor. The horrible darkness of the cave became even blacker.

When Stuart opened his eyes again, he thought he'd been rendered blind by the mighty blow on the head. Then he knew that it was just still dark. He tried to sit up, but his arms and legs were securely tied.

He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious nor what time it was. But he did realize that the longer he delayed, the less would be his chance of getting out of this trap.

Brute strength wouldn't have helped any man in his position so Stuart began to use his brain. He went over the course of events from the moment he entered the cavern. First, his flashlight had been knocked down and broken. The flashlight! That meant a glass lens—sharp pieces of it lying somewhere on the floor of the main cave.

Moving like an inchworm, by hoisting his legs and dragging himself forward, Stuart managed to move toward the narrow channel between the caves. He found the gun that had been knocked out of his hand and he took this along with him. He reached the main cavern and started to roll over and over, methodically approaching the approximate spot where the flash had fallen.

IT TOOK at least twenty minutes, but he found it. Fingers sorted the small bits of glass until they located the largest of them—and the sharpest. He drew his legs up, heedless of the pain that act caused. Slowly the sliver of glass slit through the rope freeing his ankles.

He wriggled to the wall, set his back against it and moved himself

up until he was standing erect. His wrists were next and much more difficult to reach than the ankles had been, but finally the rope fell away. Stuart massaged swollen wrists and walked toward the entrance to the main cave and the small ledge just beyond it. The first thing he looked for was the rope. It was gone, and his position very difficult.

Thirty feet straight up to the top. Maybe a hundred and fifty feet straight down onto jagged rock. Stuart groaned and sat down to think again. Perhaps there was another entrance to the cave, from somewhere behind Kerrigan's house. But to find this in the darkness was next to impossible.

Then Stuart cocked an ear. There was a different sound to the surf below. It actually swept up and hit the sides of the cliff. He knew what that meant. The tide was in. Deep enough? Perhaps—and anyway worth the chance. Simply waiting here would get him nothing but death—slow or fast. He knew that the tide was very high at this point, but so were many of the sharp rocks. To plunge blindly over the ledge was taking a big chance.

Stuart arose and moved to the edge. He shed his coat and shoes, wrapped the gun in them and shoved the bundle into a crevice. Then he took a deep breath and jumped as far out as possible.

He plummeted through the air until it seemed he'd fallen ten miles. Then he caught the first glimpse of the white-capped surf. His arms stretched out and cut the water cleanly. He went down, down until his lungs felt ready to burst.

Kicking out, he changed his course, broke water and breathed in fresh air. He swam toward land, but a moment later he ducked beneath the surface of the water. A boat was coming toward him. He stayed down as long as he dared, rose again and saw the boat—a rowboat with an outboard motor, sputtering straight out

to sea. And there was nobody in it.

Stuart started to swim with great strokes. He wanted to overtake that boat. It couldn't have simply drifted from shore because its motor hummed. Gradually he started to overtake the craft which bucked the surf and made little headway now. Stuart battled the same surf and often it rose up to engulf him and blot all vision for a moment.

He caught a glimpse of the small craft not more than thirty feet directly ahead and redoubled his efforts. Then the surf smacked him and he went under. When he came to the surface again, the boat was gone. He swam in a wide circle, but there wasn't a sign of it. That craft had been wiped off the sea as neatly as though some huge bird had swept down out of the darkness and seized it.

Stuart was tiring and there was no use conducting a further search. There were things to do ashore. He let the surf carry him shoreward and reached the rocky land. After wringing out his clothes, he walked toward the lower part of the cliff where a stairway had been cut.

CHAPTER IV

ALASKAN KILLER

WHEN he stepped into the house, nobody greeted him. He called Kerrigan's name. There was no answer. Perhaps the two of them were looking for him.

Stuart went upstairs and helped himself to a suit out of Gordon's bag. It fitted him well. He appropriated a pair of moccasin slippers too. During the time it took to dress, he kept glancing out of the windows for signs of Kerrigan and Gordon.

Finally Stuart went downstairs and sat near the phone. There were only two of the original six members of the mining company left. Kerrigan and Gordon. Meredith and Terry had died in this house. Leonard

was supposed to have been killed during a storm in Alaska. Alexander had met violent death in his hotel room. Stuart was certain about three of those four dead men, but Bates, the guide, presented some interesting possibilities.

On an impulse, Stuart picked up the phone, and spent the next several minutes calling various numbers.

There were footsteps on the porch, the door opened and Kerrigan and Gordon stepped in. They stared at Stuart for a moment and then, with happy cries, hurried to his side.

"We've scoured the whole estate and beyond it," Kerrigan said.

"Without finding a trace of you," Gordon put in. "We were coming back to call police headquarters for help. What happened, sergeant?"

Stuart borrowed a cigarette, legally begged the use of Gordon's suit and then told them what had happened in the cave. He omitted mention of the outboard motor-equipped rowboat which had vanished in a couple of seconds. Stuart wasn't sure himself what the rowboat meant or how it had disappeared.

"I know about the cave," Kerrigan said, "but I've never been in it. Only way is down a rope over the cliff and I'm not partial to tricks of that kind. We'd better arm ourselves with guns and lights. In the morning we can examine the cave."

"Good," Stuart said. "We'll do that. Kerrigan, you'll find a good-sized phone bill at the end of the month. I called Seattle and got some results, however. Alexander sailed from Alaska and arrived about thirty-six hours ago. Bates, your guide, also took passage and hit the West Coast fully three weeks ago. Which definitely puts Blake in the running."

"He's after the granite gods," Gordon gasped. "He must have tricked us somehow or learned, later on, that the rock did possess value."

Stuart shook his head. "I'm sorry to blow up that theory, Gordon. It would have been a perfect solution to

our problem. I phoned Doug Terry's house. His valet gave me some startling news. John Alexander visited Terry yesterday. And for our further enlightenment Terry's granite god has been stolen. However, soon after Alexander departed, Terry sent a piece of his granite god to a laboratory for analysis. The result came back today and the valet read it to me over the phone. The granite god is made of granite and nothing else. It's worthless."

GORDON chewed on his lower lip. "But why then, should those pieces of stone be stolen? Maybe mine is also missing. Meredith's too."

"Meredith's is gone," Stuart said. "I called his home. You'd better see about yours, Gordon."

Gordon hurried to the phone. Kerrigan sat down slowly and lit a cigarette.

"Bates," he said, "could easily be responsible, I never liked him. Big fellow, beetle-browed and strong as a bull. Yet I can't see what he wants those granite gods for."

Gordon returned, flushed and excited. "Someone broke into my house earlier tonight. The granite god was stolen. Sergeant, they must mean something. And we can't just sit here, waiting—waiting until that damned storm comes again and carries one of us off."

"Just the same," Stuart said, "you'll stay. I'm going into town. Be back in a couple of hours. Keep your eyes and ears open."

But Stuart didn't go into town. He drove his car away from the house, parked it and returned on foot.

He didn't use the path either, nor pass through the gate. Instead, he clambered over a high steel fence, dived into heavy brush and wriggled toward the side of the house where the big living room was located.

After intently examining the ground there, Stuart looked up at the towering trees which had blown so violently during the ghost storm.

There was nothing to indicate that the storm was a man-made affair. Nothing to show that the Storm God wasn't real and that his powers couldn't begin a violent hurricane over a limited space.

Stuart crawled on hands and knees to the rear of the house. There was only one entrance there—through the kitchen. The house was in darkness except for a weak light from one of the upstairs bedrooms. Apparently Kerrigan and Gordon decided they could maintain a vigil and take turns at resting too.

Stuart tried the back door gently, found it locked and then slid a small strip of paper just above the lock. If that door was opened, the paper was bound to fall and yet hardly attract the attention of whoever was going in or out. By that way Stuart would know whether or not the door had been used.

Now he crept around to the front of the house. Bates was bound to appear. All the other members of the fateful Alaskan journey had been killed. If Bates meant to clean them all out, Kerrigan and Gordon would be next.

Stuart sneaked across the porch to a big window overlooking the living room and also part of the reception hall. This, he knew, was unlocked because he'd turned the latch himself before leaving.

He raised that window a scant inch, settled himself into a more or less comfortable position and waited. If anyone moved inside the house, he'd hear him. If Bates came slinking toward the front door, he'd run into a mess of trouble represented by the thirty-eight pistol which Stuart clutched.

HALF an hour went by. It would be dawn in three more hours. The cool, crisp air kept Stuart wide awake, but he rested too. Then he heard a scuffling sound, as though a chair or some other small object inside the house had been brushed

against. He peered through the big window. There was a shadowy form in the hallway, moving toward the steps. A bulky, towering form too, unquestionably Bates, the guide. Kerrigan's description of him had been perfect.

When he vanished from sight, Stuart raised the window higher, slipped through it and crept toward the steps. Bates was at the top and trying to figure out which room he wanted to visit. He started moving toward the left.

Stuart went up the steps two at a time, but making no more noise than a cat on the prowl. He saw Bates reach under his coat and withdraw a long, deadly knife. The guide dropped a hand on the doorknob, turned it quietly and opened the door a crack. The room was in darkness, but even from where he stood, Stuart could hear the regular deep breathing of a man who slept soundly.

Bates went in and the detective ran along the hallway, gun half raised. He paused beside the door, saw Bates approach the bed and lift the knife high. Stuart snapped on the lights.

Bates whirled and stiffened into immobility while a look of intense hatred seared his features. Stuart's gun covered him. Kerrigan, half asleep, sat up and blinked himself wide awake. He flung the covers aside, grabbed Bates and wrested the knife from his hand. Then he searched him, found a heavy revolver and appropriated this.

Gordon's door banged down the hall and he came running up, fully dressed. Stuart moved closer to Bates and pressed the muzzle of his pistol against the guide's back.

"My hunch was right this time," he said. "I thought Bates would come so I waited for him. All right, Bates, we're going downstairs. You're to do some talking, so start to think about what you'll say. Move!"

Kerrigan handed the big gun he'd taken from Bates to Gordon, donned his clothes and they all went to the

first floor. Gordon found a length of stout rope. Stuart ordered Bates to sit down in a straight-backed chair and Gordon tied him firmly.

"It looks like this is the end of the line for you, Bates," Stuart said. "You killed three men that we know of. You just tried to murder Kerrigan and I expect the heavy weight in your side pocket is either from the granite idol you swiped at Gordon's home, or it's Kerrigan's, which you picked up in this house. No matter—we'll get to the meaning of those granite gods later. At the moment I want a statement from you."

Bates looked at his three captors and leered. If the man was afraid, he certainly hid his emotions well.

"Okay, pals," he snarled. "But suppose we start by explaining the granite gods, as you call them. They are gods all right, carved out of a mountain ruled over by the Storm God. The same guy who can start a storm anywhere he wishes. Right here in this room, for instance. He can make the wind howl so fast a man could easily die from lack of breath. Like Meredith and Terry."

"We know what you mean," Stuart said. "How did you do it?"

"Me?" Bates laughed harshly. "You got this figured all wrong. You're like a lot of other damn fools who don't believe in certain things. Well, I lived in Alaska for years. I know this Storm God is the real thing. The Eskimos worship him. The white men don't say much about it, but they respect the Storm God."

"He's a giant—all shiny—like ice. Maybe he is ice. Nobody ever got close enough to find out. But he took Leonard, didn't he? He tried to get Alexander too, but missed up. Later on, he took care of him."

GORDON moved forward. "This man is insane. Yes, we heard all about the Storm God in Alaska. Everything Bates has said is common knowledge there, but it's the bunk just the same. I say, let's beat the

truth out of this killer. Make him tell why he murdered those men."

"Wait a minute." Stuart waved Gordon aside. "I'd like to know more about the Storm God. You see, he's not exactly a stranger to me and he does possess certain qualities that I can't explain. The fact is, I put three bullets smack through him and he didn't fall. Go on, Bates. You know the Storm God. He's operating here, taking revenge or something against the men who invaded his mountain. What's it got to do with you?"

Bates was smiling coldly, as sure of himself as though he held the guns and the others were tied to chairs.

"I carved those idols, one for each of the men who hired me as a guide. The Eskimos told me not to do it, but I laughed at them. Then after these wise guys had gone back to the States with the idols, we had violent storms every day, every night. Men died in them. Mines were destroyed. There were avalanches and even the glaciers on the Storm God's mountain, started to move faster. I knew I had to get those idols back. The Eskimos knew it too and made me promise to come here after them."

Gordon laughed sarcastically, but Kerrigan looked a bit paler than usual and kept running fingers through his tousled hair. Stuart looked down at Bates.

"That," he said, "is the craziest excuse for murder I ever heard. Bates, you're a fool if you expect us to believe you."

"Yeah? Okay, I'm a fool. But you three guys are crazier than me because you refuse to believe. Listen, while I'm searching for those idols, I'm under the protection of the Storm God. The Eskimos promised me that. I can call on him any time I wish and he'll answer me. I could have one of those storms begin right now. I could get up out of this chair any time I wished. Ropes mean nothing to me."

"Let's see you do it," Gordon derided. "Maybe you're invulnerable to

a bullet also, eh? Try it, Bates, and see what happens."

"No—no, don't make him do that," Kerrigan cried. "I've stood about all I can. The next storm may kill me—or you, Gordon. Don't tempt fate. I heard those stories in Alaska too and the Eskimos believe them. Why shouldn't we?"

"Because we're civilized and educated," Gordon shouted. "Bates is lying and he knows it. Do you suppose he'd sit there meekly like this if he could summon such powers? Nonsense!"

"Wait," Bates said quietly, "and see."

Stuart stuffed his gun into his holster. "All right," he said. "We've had enough of the baloney. You still haven't told us why you murdered Meredith, Terry and Alexander. Or maybe the Storm God did that. Pretty nice to blame murders on a ghost, Bates, but it won't work. Either you start talking now or we'll all take a ride to headquarters. I don't care which, so—"

"The lights!" Kerrigan yelled. "Look—"

The lights were flickering, just as they did before Meredith and Terry died. Bates, smiling smugly, was the only man in the room who betrayed no fear. Even Stuart felt icy chills running up and down his spine.

Then the soft moan of the wind reached their ears. It grew and grew into a howling hurricane. The loose window blind banged. Rain spattered the windows. Trees were bent over, some of their early spring leaves wafted to the ground. The lights went out, but an instant before that happened, Stuart saw Bates rise up out of the chair and the ropes which had held him fell to the floor.

STUART'S spell of horror was broken by the escape of this Alaskan guide. He flung himself at the man, but Bates seemed to have been prepared for that. The heel of a big hand caught Stuart on the chin,

snapped his head back and sent him reeling across the room. He tripped over a chair and fell down.

Gordon, with Bates' big gun in his fist, charged at the man, but Bates used the strength and skill he'd acquired in fighting arctic elements. He lowered his head and met Gordon's attack with a plunge straight at the mining operator's stomach. Gordon doubled up. A fist slashed across his face and he dropped flat.

Kerrigan wasn't waiting to see the final outcome of all this. He sprinted toward the door and the safety offered by the darkness on the estate. Even the raging storm didn't stop him. He managed to reach the door before Bates lunged. Kerrigan went down.

Bates, breathing heavily, knelt beside the fallen man and fastened huge fingers around Kerrigan's throat. He began to squeeze, but kept looking up to see if either Gordon or Stuart approached. Kerrigan's face grew mottled and purple. His eyes bulged and his struggles grew weaker. Bates used even more force until his fingers almost sank out of sight in the flesh around Kerrigan's throat.

Stuart got to his feet again. He was aware that the storm had ceased abruptly. Then he heard Kerrigan's heels beating against the hallway floor. Stuart unlimbered his gun. At that moment the lights flickered a few times, just before coming back on. He saw Bates choking Kerrigan. Stuart fired one shot high because he didn't want to risk hitting Kerrigan.

Bates let go of his victim, yanked the door open and ran like mad down the path. Stuart raced out on the porch after him. Gordon came too and elbowed Stuart aside. Gordon held a flashlight in one hand and Bates' big gun in the other.

He snapped on the flash. Its ray centered on Bates who gave one frightened look over his shoulder and tried to run faster. Gordon carefully leveled the pistol and before Stuart could stop him, he fired once.

Bates stopped as though he'd encountered an invisible wall. His big body straightened up to an abnormal height. Both hands doubled up across his chest. He half turned and then folded up until he was on his knees.

"Come on," Stuart yelled. "You got him, Gordon."

"And I'll get him again—the killer." Gordon was aiming his gun. Stuart knocked it aside and sprinted toward Bates. Gordon came also and extinguished the light as he ran.

Stuart reached the spot where Bates had fallen, but the man wasn't there. Gordon turned on his flash again. There was blood on the path, enough to show that Bates must have been badly wounded.

"You let him get away," Gordon snapped. "I could have winged him again—through the leg or something."

Stuart didn't answer. He was looking for a trail of blood, but if there was any, the high grass concealed it. Bates had vanished completely.

CHAPTER V

TUNNEL TO DANGER

WHEN they gave up the hunt and returned to the porch, Kerrigan was there, nursing his swollen throat and both eyes were shining in horror.

"It told you not to taunt him," he croaked. "Look what happened. He can summon the Storm God. That legend is true. I always thought it was. The Eskimos told us we'd never be allowed to mine that mountain even if we did find valuable minerals. It belonged to the Storm God."

"Let's go inside and cool off," Stuart advised. "I hardly blame Kerrigan for blowing his top."

"All right," Gordon conceded. "Let's all have a drink. I think we need one."

Kerrigan downed a brandy in one gulp. Gordon sipped his, but Stuart didn't touch the inhaler Gordon hand-

ed him. Stuart picked up the ropes which had held Bates in the chair.

"I wonder how Bates was able to remove these ropes. You tied him up, Gordon. The ropes haven't been cut. Bates didn't slip out of them. The knots just came unfastened as you can see."

Gordon finished his drink and poured another. "I must confess that is beyond me. Bates wasn't bluffing. I don't see how on earth he could have got free. Believe me, I tied him plenty tight. I even hoped the ropes would hurt because I was thinking of Meredith and Terry at the time."

"Let's get away from here," Kerrigan moaned. "I'll go mad unless we do. What's the good of hanging around, courting death? Whether it's Bates doing the killing, or the Storm God, we've more protection in town. I'm going after my car."

Stuart jumped up. "The cars! Bates could steal one. Stay here until I get back."

Stuart went to the garage. There were four cars parked there, two of them owned by dead men. Gun in hand, Stuart prowled around the place. Then he went to the tool shed far back of the house. He found that two more sacks of cement had been removed.

When he returned, Kerrigan was slumped in a chair alternately shivering and sweating. Gordon looked glum.

Stuart said, "I've got bad news. Bates, or somebody beat us to the cars. The distributors have been removed. Also, the telephone wire is cut—a whole section missing so we can't repair it."

Kerrigan looked up, his face more gaunt than ever. "We've got to get away. Bates is bad enough, but I'm afraid of that—that supernatural power which creates storm when there are no clouds, when the sky is clear. When it rains torrents and the ground isn't even wet. You can't fight things like that."

"Well, let's stop talking and do

something." Gordon started for the door. "I'm pretty good with cars and I think I'll be able to rig something to start one of them. Coming, Kerrigan?"

Kerrigan practically flew out of the house. Stuart sat down slowly. He picked up the ropes which had bound Bates, wondering if Gordon had purposely tied them so that the prisoner could get loose. But if so, why had Gordon done his very best to obliterate the Alaskan guide?

Stuart went upstairs to Kerrigan's private study. He opened drawers in a big desk, studied papers and letters. Finally he looked out of a rear window. There were lights in the garage. Kerrigan and Gordon were doing their best to repair a car.

ONE thing Stuart had found out. Perhaps those granite idols taken from an Alaskan mountain, proved there were no valuable minerals there. But the mining combine now operated by Kerrigan and Gordon was extremely valuable. The ores brought forth from the several mines were priceless for defense work. Kerrigan's letters and notes proved that.

Stuart's mind reverted to the disappearance of the two bodies. Neither Gordon nor Kerrigan could possibly have arranged that—so there was someone else. Bates, probably, and he had a method by which he could enter the living room and disappear almost instantly.

Stuart went to the back door, opened it cautiously and saw the little piece of paper he'd placed there, float to the porch. Bates hadn't entered the house via the back door then and certainly not the front door, because Stuart had been crouched close to it every moment.

The front door slammed suddenly and Stuart drew his gun, whirled and raced to the hall. The door was closed, but he knew it had slammed. Someone had entered and vanished quickly, pausing only to snatch a drink of brandy from the decanter. In his

haste the intruder had spilled liquor carelessly.

Stuart looked toward the cellar door, also leading off the hallway. He opened it, threw the beam of his flash down the steps and saw a smear of blood on the white-washed wall. He hurried down to it. The blood was wet. There was a couple of more drops on the cement floor. They didn't create a good trail, but Stuart saw one more gory stain near the west wall. A sub-cellar was there, equipped with a narrow door.

Stuart opened this cautiously, finger tight against the trigger of his gun. Nothing happened. He noticed that this sub-cellar was built right out beneath the ground under the living room windows—the spot where the freak storms always originated.

The detective's flash illuminated the dirt floor of the sub-cellar and he saw marks indicating that someone had either been dragged, or dragged himself, across the floor. Stuart squirmed through the small door and followed those marks until they ended very abruptly in the middle of the floor. He scratched into the dirt with his fingers, found a hard ridge and then a tiny, extremely well-concealed iron ring, colored to match the earth. He tugged at this and a trap door opened.

Instantly a blast of cool air came out to greet him. The same kind of air that existed in the system of caves beneath the cliff.

Stuart's eyes widened. Here was the answer to the vanished bodies, the methods by which Bates entered the house and now, very likely, had made good his escape from the estate.

Heavy footsteps on the floor above indicated that Kerrigan and Gordon were back. Stuart would rather they knew nothing of this, but it was too late. He'd left the cellar door open and both men were making their way cautiously down the stairs.

"In here," Stuart called out. "The sub-cellar. I've found how our ghost enters and leaves the house."

Both men crawled in to join Stuart and they stared in open awe at the entrance.

Stuart said, "Bates just went down this tunnel. It must lead into the caverns under the cliff, so it's also probable this is the only exit. Are you two willing to follow me and try to corner him?"

"Yes," Gordon said quickly. "Getting a car started is out of the question, so I'd just as soon take the offensive as sit and wait for Bates to crack down on us. Let's go."

KERRIGAN didn't have to tell how he felt. His face indicated the fear that predominated. Stuart slipped into the tunnel, found crude steps cut into solid rock and went down them. He reached the floor of a narrow passage which led in only one direction—toward the cliff.

They had to practically crawl along because of the narrow confines, but Stuart derived some satisfaction from seeing several more smears of blood. Bates had traveled this same route.

The tunnel ended in a small cavern. They prowled this, found another exit and finally reached the cavern adjacent to the large one which opened onto the ledge overlooking the sea. Gordon, without waiting for orders, hurried through the passage to the big cave. Stuart moved to check him, but it was too late. Bates must be in that big cave. He'd hear Gordon and be ready.

Stuart followed and Kerrigan came up at the rear, as far behind as he dared. Stuart heard a sharp blow, a moan and then a dragging sound. He reached the end of the passage, took a long breath and jumped clear. Bates, a heavy club in his hand, made a wild swing at Stuart and missed. Stuart moved in then, fast. Gun raised, he aimed it at Bates' skull.

Kerrigan blundered into the big cave too. He saw Bates, gave a yelp of alarm and tried to get out of the way. He shouldered Stuart enough

to throw him off balance and Bates moved in. The club smashed against the back of Stuart's head and he dropped. Kerrigan started running. Bates hurled the club at him and Kerrigan went down too.

Bates worked quickly then. He was wounded. His shirt was dark with blood, but the man's stamina was remarkable. He disarmed Stuart, took his own gun away from Gordon and then searched Kerrigan without finding a weapon. He sat down on a boulder, both guns in his hands, and waited until the victims recovered.

Stuart got up first and kept his hands raised shoulder high. Gordon stumbled to his feet. Bates had arranged all the flashlights so that they illuminated the cave and yet kept him well in the shadows. Gordon's rage shone brightly in his narrowed eyes.

"So you came to pay me a visit, huh?" Bates chortled. "Ain't that nice, especially since I couldn't have wished for anything better. Okay—you're here. You know my secret, but you'll never talk. This place will become your tomb. I can seal up the door in the house so it will never be found. Maybe I'll burn the joint to the ground."

"You're going to kill all of us, are you?" Stuart asked. "Whom do you begin with, Bates?"

"Gordon! That rotten heel. I know he's the one who shot me. He was afraid I might get caught and talk too much."

"You fool," Gordon shouted. "Don't you know this man is an officer?"

"Sure—I also know you're a double-crosser," Bates said smoothly. "That's why all of you are going to die. You were to pay me ten grand for pushing Leonard and Alexander off the cliff up in Alaska. You paid me one thousand on account and when I wrote for the rest, you wrote back that if I didn't keep my mouth shut, I'd get the rope. Do you see a rope around my neck now, Gordon? It was smart of you to tie me up loose so I'd get away. Then you could gun

me out and have a good excuse for shooting. Smart guy—so smart you're about to die."

STUART glanced at Gordon. "Looks like you let yourself in for more than you can handle, Mr. Murderer. Oh, I guessed you were behind it, Gordon. You made sure Bates would get loose. You were the least affected by the Storm God's manifestations. Bates came here to collect. Instead, you hired him to do more murder at a greater profit.

"You wanted all your partners out of the way so you'd control the mines, jointly owned and jointly shared. Those mines are worth millions. The granite idol business was just a cover-up—to remove suspicion from the correct motive. Alexander guessed what was going to happen and he phoned me."

"Oh, stop it," Gordon snapped. "We're both on a spot now. Help me out and you'll be well paid."

"With a bullet? Or a dose of aconitine?" Stuart asked. "The stuff that killed Meredith and Terry. Yes, I know about that too. Aconitine causes almost instant death and one symptom is a constriction of the throat. Those men called for air, not because the Storm God was killing them, but because of poison you administered and timed to take effect just as Bates turned on the fake storm.

"That was done from the sub-cellar. Compressed air to throw chemical rain of some volatile substance that evaporated immediately. A recording of a storm amplified many times. The Storm God! That was just your way to tie the murders up with what happened in Alaska, so when the necessary showdown came, you could blame Bates. I found the apparatus. It could even be rigged so it would work all by itself."

Bates said, "Gordon is twice a rat. I knew Alexander had escaped death. Then I heard he was heading for the States just as soon as he got strong enough. I took a boat, but he beat me

here. He trusted Terry—that weak-kneed, milk-blooded sap. So he went to him and Terry told Gordon. I contacted Gordon and he gave me dough. I knocked off Alexander and reported it to Terry at this house. He answered the phone. I knew he was a right guy so I told him."

"So it all comes out in the wash," Stuart grunted. "A fine time though, when we're all lined up to be killed. You were the glittering man, Bates. You put on some kind of an outfit that seemed to increase your height and shimmered nicely, like ice. I put a few bullet holes through it. In fact, I knocked the thing down with lead after you hung it on the cave wall to draw my fire. That's how it vanished so quickly.

"Then you crept up behind and slugged me. To build up the Storm God, you even tried to gun me out while I was on my way up here. Terry was ordered to say that a ghost snatched Meredith's corpse. Poor Terry, between two fires, even though Gordon was after the Alaskan enterprises so he had his granite god tested for minerals. He didn't know he was doomed too."

Bates moved the guns suggestively. "We've had enough chatter, pals. Stand up, Gordon, and take it. The copper goes next and then that guy who is still out cold."

"Just a minute, Bates," Stuart said. "Do you really think you'll leave the cave too?"

"Why not?" Bates asked suspiciously. "I'm winged, sure, but not so bad I can't navigate. I got Gordon's dough, enough to get to Alaska on and give me a nice little stake besides. Why shouldn't I leave the cave?"

"Because when you came through the house a few moments ago, you stopped and took a drink of brandy. You were in such a hurry that you didn't even replace the stopper."

"Okay—so I needed a drink. What's that got to do with it?"

"Only," Stuart said easily, "that the brandy was doped with aconitine. Gordon intended to kill Kerrigan too. Meredith and Terry had a drink out of that decanter. So did you."

Bates gave a strangled gasp. "You're lying. It's just a trick. It's just—copper, what do you use for an antidote?"

"Put down the guns and I'll tell you," Stuart said.

STUART moved forward a couple of steps. Bates' agitation was so great that he didn't even notice this.

Then Gordon bellowed a suggestion which Stuart had mentally prayed he wouldn't think of.

"Kill the detective and Kerrigan. I know the antidote, Bates. I'll fix you up."

Bates looked over at Gordon and at that moment Stuart leaped. He sent Bates down, but the man still clung to both guns. His wound didn't seem to have affected his strength much and those guns beat a savage brutal rhythm against Stuart's head and shoulders.

Gordon was moving in. Stuart suddenly gave Bates a tremendous shove, rose and sprinted like mad toward the ledge. He fell onto it and stayed there.

Bates, on his feet again, had Gordon checked. He backed toward Stuart.

"Go ahead and jump, sucker. I don't care. Also, I think you were just trying to scare me. The poison worked fast. I know, because I had to start the storm by the split second. I'd have been dead if there was any in me."

Stuart got up and trudged back into the cave. He stepped just on the edge of the strong light from the torches. Bates leveled his gun.

"I'm not fooling any longer," he

snarled. "You all get it now. Kerrigan is out so he can't help. I've got two guns so neither of you can try to jump me when I start shooting. Here she comes." There was a single shot. Neither of Bates' guns was smoking. Bates had a look of intense awe on his face. Then he made a tremendous effort to get his guns up. He failed, doubled up and fell onto the floor. Gordon started forward, but a gun in Stuart's hand checked him.

"There are more slugs in this, Gordon," he said coldly. "It's my own gun. I left it here when I jumped off the ledge. Bates won't die. He'll talk too—to save his own neck. You're cooked."

"You've got nothing on me," Gordon screamed. "You can't try a man for murder without a corpse."

"I'll get them," Stuart said. "Bates carried the bodies of Meredith and Terry to this cave, dumped them over the ledge and then went down to the shore. Old rowboats were ready. He swiped cement and sand from Kerrigan's toolhouse, mixed a fast-setting batch and poured it over the bodies in the bottom of the boat. He hooked an outboard motor on, started it and pushed the craft into the surf."

"Bates knew it could travel just so far and then sink like the big rock it really was. Divers can find the boat and the bodies. I know just about where they went down because I saw them go. You had to dispose of them because any doctor would have seen through your trick."

"Stick out your hands, Gordon. I've a pair of cuffs for you. Then you'll carry Bates out and we'll all head for town. I hid the distributors of the cars so we won't have much trouble. Going to obey, Gordon? Or shall I pump some lead into your hide too?"



Deck of Death

By Maurice Phillips

Marco Sewell had the death card up his sleeve—the ace of spades. But when he decided to deal it out twice in succession he found that the Grim Reaper was ready to call all bets.

THE door to his private office opened and again the helpless feeling caught Marco Sewell. Until a few months ago it was altogether an unknown feeling to him, but now he knew the futile fury of a rat trapped in a maze, or a prisoner caged behind bars. Yet none of this showed in Marco's face as he waved an amiable greeting to the big man who, merely by entering, seemed to cast an appropriative hand over this place.

"I thought you'd gone on that trip—fishing trip, wasn't it?" Marco said, his smile hiding the hate that burned within him.

George Pendegrast dropped his huge, powerful body into a chair that looked sizes too small for him, and grunted a negative.

"Hunting," he corrected. "Moose hunting. You miss a lot, Marco, sticking to the city the way you do. I'll bet you haven't been away from this smoke-ridden, foul-smelling town in over a year, have you?"

Marco grimaced. "Seventeen years I haven't been away from this town. Everybody knows it too. I was born in the country, and for my money you can have it."

His sensitive ears caught the click of chips and the staccato of roulette wheels from the next room; the insinuating melody of a rumba floated up from downstairs. Marco leaned back, content. This was his world, he held it in the palm of his hand, he could

juggle it to any tune— Then Marco remembered George Pendegrast, opposite him, and the contentment drained away from his soul.

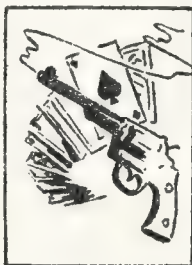
"I'll be back in two weeks," Pendegrast said, looking at his fingertips. "Wednesday, the nineteenth. I'll need a little money before I go, Marco. If you can scare up a couple of grand—"

Marco sat back, his face expressionless, but his hands bunched into hard, white-knuckled fists. One grand ten days ago, another grand two weeks before that, and now—now two thousand more. And in a couple of weeks George Pendegrast would be back—his palm itching again.

"That's four thousand in five weeks, George," Marco said softly. "That's pretty high tariff. Don't get the idea that I'm sore, or anything like that, but—" Marco's jaws clamped tight, the words stuck in his craw. Marco, the tough guy, owner of the biggest gambling layout in the city, the guy who could make politicians toe the line, couldn't pull his tail between his legs before this overgrown playboy.

Pendegrast smiled indulgently. "I'm glad you're not sore, Marco. It's just another business angle, of course. Nothing personal. But with me taking care of your books—"

Marco got it. In two minutes the money was in George Pendegrast's pocket. Marco, after all, was no dope. He didn't need diagrams. Bigger fish



than Marco Sewell were doing time in federal pens because they'd been caught in income tax nets.

Marco could have kicked himself for ever hiring the accounting firm of Pendegrast and Frazer—George Pendegrast and Henry Frazer. The boys with names, with class, with one-hundred-proof blue blood. Marco thought he had made a valuable connection when George Pendegrast began auditing his books. But George had phoned them so neatly—

Marco accompanied Pendegrast downstairs. As they passed through the beautifully appointed gambling rooms, Marco smiled at the suckers. For Marco's mind had already, with characteristic directness, found a way out. Nothing classy, nothing subtle. Just a simple, direct method that Marco had learned on his way up.

Murder!

WHEN they got down to the dance floor, Iris Stanton was just coming on to do her number. Marco didn't watch her. His eyes, narrowed and gleaming with a fierce flame, burned in the direction of Henry Frazer, Pendegrast's partner. The word had gone out that Iris Stanton was Marco's special protégé and everybody accepted that to mean hands off. Everybody, that is, but Henry Frazer. He'd gone completely overboard for Iris.

This Iris Stanton was a number. Slender, svelte, with fresh cool loveliness, she had an elusive quality that Marco couldn't put a name to. She sang the same songs others did, she made the same curtsies, she had the same accompaniment—yet she imparted to her songs a fragrance all her own. And it was the kind of fragrance that Marco went for. Marco—and Henry Frazer.

Marco's fists tightened suddenly and only his gambler's instincts hid his feelings. Iris had finished her number, and her eyes, which Marco remembered used to glisten for him, now shone for Henry Frazer. Without moving his lips, without batting an eyelash, Marco cursed long and earnestly.

It clicked in his mind, then, the way the tumblers of a safe click to the right combination. Henry Frazer would have to be put out of the way, too.

Nothing personal, of course. Marco wasn't the type the prohibition gangsters were—the boys who'd shoot if you looked at their girls the wrong way. Not Marco, he had been around too long. Girls had never meant much to him.

He always had the feeling the right one would come along, and when she did— Well, Iris Stanton had come along and Marco hadn't rushed things. No heavy stuff. The light touch. Flowers, perfumes, imported tidbits—finesse. And just when Marco thought everything was perfect, along came Henry Frazer.

Marco shrugged. He wasn't going to rush things now, either. He didn't know how he was going to take care of Pendegrast and Frazer, but it would come to him. Fate would take care of things like that.

Fate did. Fate, and Henry Frazer's honesty. Frazer was a man of scruples and high business ethics, Marco discovered. For only two days after Pendegrast went away on his hunting trip, the firm of Pendegrast and Frazer was publicly dissolved.

The reason, Marco learned by his private cunning methods, was that Frazer objected strongly to his partner's business practices. Marco's heart filled with gladness. He was dealing the cards now and Fate had shot the ace of spades—the death card—up his cuff.

It was an old card and it went under many guises. This time it was hidden under the cloak of friction. The two erstwhile partners had had many disputes. There were witnesses who could prove that. As he toyed with this new development, Marco mentally patted the ace of spades up his sleeve, and smiled.

THE phone rang and when Marco recognized the voice on the other end of the wire, his smile vanished. It was Pendegrast, back at his Long

Island home a week before he was due.

"Something happen on your trip?" Marco asked.

Pendegrast's voice was brusque. He didn't answer the question, merely asked if Marco could dig up fifteen hundred at once.

"That's a lot of money," Marco hedged. "When do you need it?"

"Even if you take your time, you can drive out here in an hour and a half," Pendegrast said, and hung up.

Marco arrived within the allotted period, even though he had to walk fifteen minutes from where he parked his coupé.

"Didn't know you were in the habit of answering the bell yourself," he said, as the door opened to his ring.

"My help isn't here," Pendegrast explained. "They didn't expect me so soon."

He appeared to be his usual genial self, but underneath, Marco observed, Pendegrast was uncomfortable. The big man was clad in a maroon dressing gown, which seemed to accentuate his hugeness, his elemental strength.

"Thanks, Marco," he said, leading the way inside. "I knew you'd come through for me." He rubbed a large hand across his chest, patted the back of his neck. "You've got something for me, haven't you?" He stood there widespread on two massive legs, hands clasped behind his back, fidgeting.

"Of course I've got something for you," Marco agreed.

He put his hand to his pocket. It came out holding a gun.

Pendegrast's eyes goggled, less with terror than rage. He lunged forward, roaring, his oak-thick arms outstretched, his hands crooked like grappling irons. Marco felt the hands tighten around his neck, felt the auditor's savage breath. Marco decided this had gone far enough. He pulled the trigger four times quickly

Marco felt a high elation as he speeded back to the city. Pendegrast had made his last collection—with a bullet bonus. Now all Marco had to do was

point the evidence to Henry Frazer.

Frazer lived in a small, self-service elevator apartment house. Unseen, Marco let himself into the lift, was carried upstairs. He had a key to the apartment—a duplicate of the key he had recently borrowed from Iris Stanton's purse.

Five minutes later Marco was hurrying down the stairs, chuckling. He had dealt the ace of spades twice in the same afternoon, and no man could prove he had even handled the deck of death.

MARCO slept better that night than he had in a long time. He got up late, tackled a hearty breakfast. He was finishing his coffee when he was interrupted by two visitors. Marco's eyelids flickered as he recognized them. Reeves and Gissing, of Homicide.

"I didn't know the Policemen's Ball was due again," Marco said. "Put me down for a dozen tickets."

"This isn't that kind of ball," Reeves said. His fingers drummed a tattoo on the table. "What time were you at Frazer's yesterday, Marco?"

Marco put a napkin to his lips. "I wasn't. Why?"

"You're part of Frazer's alibi," the detective explained. Under prodding, he gave Marco the whole story.

"George Pendegrast," he said, "returned suddenly from a hunting trip yesterday. He immediately phoned his doctor, asking him to drop in around six. When the doctor arrived, no one answered his ring, but he got in through an open terrace window. He found Pendegrast dead. That places the shooting between four and six o'clock, because the call came through at four.

"Frazer, being Pendegrast's ex-partner, was naturally on the list for questioning. It was in Frazer's apartment we found a gun which, when checked, turned out to be the one that did in Pendegrast.

"Frazer," Reeves finished, "claims

he was at home between four and six. Iris Stanton, the canary who warbles for you, says she was with him for a while even after six. They were, however, secretly married two days ago, and in the face of the gun evidence, the testimony of a wife may not be strong enough."

Marco's face remained wooden at mention of Iris's secret marriage. He leaned back in his chair, scratched his neck, looked out from wary eyes.

"Where do I come in?"

Reeves leaned forward. "Iris Stanton says she saw you enter Frazer's as she was driving away in a cab. If you confirm that statement—well, it might change the picture."

Marco scratched his neck. He fidgeted in his chair. "Only place I ever saw Frazer was in my club," he asserted. Inwardly he smiled. The old master's hand had not lost its cunning—even when dealing the death card. "I feel sorry for Iris, though," he said, putting on a mournful countenance.

Reeves stood up, his fingers brush-

ing some crumbs on the tablecloth "You been in the country lately?"

Marco Sewell snorted. "The only time I go there will be in a box."

In two short steps Reeves towered in front of him, peered closely. "I'm arresting you, Marco, for the murder of George Pendegrast."

Marco was on his feet, white-faced aware that the gambler's mask was dissolving from his features. "Wh-what—" he forced out.

"Poison oak," Reeves said. "The medical examiner found it on Pendegrast's hands and neck. You can't catch it in the city, but if you merely shook hands with a guy who has only a drop of it on— And the way you've been itching and scratching, Marco, at examination—"

Marco Sewell felt his pat little world begin to shatter. His wildly popping eyes saw Reeves' service gun loom in front of him and he heard his heart thump sickeningly. Now he knew why Pendegrast had returned so suddenly to the city.

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Filmtown Fadeout

By
Robert Turner



Rocky Rhodes, famous detective sergeant, had agreed to enact his life story for the films. But Rhodes' Hollywood career as screen star was sidetracked when he signed up to play the lead in a homicide scenario.

THINGS always happened like that to "Rocky" Rhodes. They would hit him all of a sudden, like Abe Dortmann's little Negro house boy did. One minute Rhodes was standing in the garden of this palatial Hollywood home, having a cigaret away from the madness of the party inside and the next he was getting it in the neck. That was how Biggs, the dark little servant, landed.

He crashed through the screen of a second story window, down through the darkness and astraddle Rhodes' shoulders like a kid playing pickaback. They scrambled in the soft earth of a flower bed, a tangled two-some. Rhodes bounced up first, yanked Biggs to his feet. He shook him until buck teeth clicked like castanets and his eyes rolled like brown ping-pong balls.

"Are you crazy?" Rhodes demanded. "What—"

"Y-y-yes, sir," Biggs affirmed chatteringly. "Ah didn't see that ol' dead man in the bedroom at first, then it were too late. Ah can't get back out the door wifout passing the body, so ah takes the window."

He glanced shudderingly up at the second floor window.

Rhodes snapped his head around again, shaking him. "What dead man?" Rhodes asked so quietly the question was scarcely audible. His face, full of knolls and lumps and scar tissue, frowned.

"Mr. Rance, the newspaper fellow, up there dead. Sho' 'nuff!" Biggs managed. "Someone kill him wif a sword!"

Rocky Rhodes despaired of getting additional information from the quaking little Negro, decided to find out for himself. He shoved Biggs ahead of him, around to the front of the huge mansion and inside.

"I'm going up to see what you're yapping about," he said, as he pushed Biggs toward the party noises emanating from the living room. "You find Abe Dortmann and take him to one side, tell him what you know. Don't let anyone else hear. I don't want the whole party up there, gawking and squawking."

Biggs bolted away, and Rhodes leaped up the stairs. He cursed his luck at every step, at the way trouble trailed him through life like a kitten after catnip.

WHEREVER Rocky Rhodes went, disaster, violence and sudden death folk wed. It started with his given name of Thaddeus and a handsome face, crowned by golden ringlets of hair. He had fought his way through half a dozen schools, joined the New York cops and become the most famous hard-boiled detective sergeant the force had ever known. On the way he acquired the nickname, "Rocky." It was more in

keeping with his now much beaten face and gray-streaked curls.

Reams of publicity on his career and the pleading of his brother, a camera man, had brought him against his better judgment to Hollywood. Here he was to star in his own life story on the screen.

Upstairs Rhodes went to the only bedroom door giving out light and saw what caused Biggs' hasty exit.

At some time everybody in film-town had wished death on Jack Rance, Allied Syndicate's star gossip columnist. But not a demise like this. Even a corpse should have some dignity.

Rance was sprawled on a polar bear rug near the lavatory door, a knife in his chest, gore forming a crimson blotch on his shirt front. His eyes were wide open. His thin lips were pressed into a shriveled circle, and in the center was the pale pink of toothless gums.

The false set of teeth that should have been covering those gums was perched rakishly on the polar bear's head. Like a misplaced grin, they leered at Rhodes as he kneeled beside the corpse.

The knife had a delicately carved wooden figure of a black, pot-bellied African savage for a handle. Rocky Rhodes recognized it instantly. Everyone in pix could do the same. It belonged to Gregory Rhodes, Rocky's brother, gift of a South Sea island chieftain while Greg was on location. Rocky turned away and closed his eyes. He winced and rubbed his hand across his face as though to wipe out the sight of this thing.

When he opened them again a group from the party stood in the doorway, staring at the corpse, the murder knife. Rocky first spotted Abe Dortmann, producer and host of the party, Harry Hunt, actor's agent, and Donna Marlo, singing star whose studio was trying to ditch her because she couldn't act worth two cents. Then he saw Hugh Rawlins, plastic dentist who could make a tooth paste

ad out of a snaggle-toothed mountaineer for a few thousand beans, a script girl and a couple of scenarists.

"All right," Rhodes said. "Come on in. I see Biggs spread the news."

Nobody answered. Instead, the group opened up like the Red Sea for the Israelites. Greg Rhodes, short, slim and wiry, marched through them like a sleepwalker. No one spoke. Finally the script girl giggled nervously. Gregory Rhodes turned to her blankly, but still said nothing. He stood next to his brother, staring down at the corpse. He suddenly reached for the knife, but Rocky caught his arm.

"Fingerprints, Greg," he said.

THIS broke the ice. Harry Hunt squinted through double-lensed glasses, wiggled his bulbous nose with his fingers. He cleared his throat.

"Did anyone call the police yet?"

"Good Lord! It had to happen to me," Abe Dortmann groaned. "It had to happen at my house!" He moved toward a bedtable phone.

Rocky Rhodes turned to his brother, put his hand on his shoulder. "A crude attempt to frame you, Greg. Someone stole the knife, figured it would put the blame on you. Got any ideas?"

The thin little camera man looked up suddenly, a half-frightened, half-startled expression on his pinched features. He lit a cigaret, sucked hollows in his sunken cheeks with deep drags. He took Rocky's hand from his shoulder, strode to the window. His fists clenched behind his back, the knuckles white.

He said to his brother: "You have an easy one this time, Rocky. It's obvious. I killed Rance. That's my knife. Nobody stole it. I killed him."

Rocky grabbed his brother's arm fiercely. "You're crazy, Greg. You couldn't. You wouldn't leave the knife right there to give you away. Besides, you had no reason to kill Rance!"

"Sure I did. I hated the double-crossing rat, just like everyone else.

He's been trying to make Donna all evening and I told him off. You saw me swing at him, downstairs. You helped break it up. Just because Donna and I broke up a couple months ago doesn't give him any right to pester her.

"We—we came up here to finish it out and I—I lost my temper." He held the cigaret to his mouth, puffed furiously. "That's all there is, Rocky. Don't try to make more."

Rocky Rhodes turned toward Donna Marlo. She was the lovely singing star for whom Greg Rhodes had been carrying the torch for several years. Even though she had thrown him over, he still loved her.

She was standing the stares well. Flamingo-red lounging pajamas accentuated the bold lines of her figure. Her skin was like old ivory. She tossed her head, with the sleek brown hair pulled back and tied in a George Washington bob.

"Why don't they come?" she said through her teeth. Her usually lovely voice was scratchy and strained. "Why don't the police come?"

Greg Rhodes looked up at the sound of her voice, with the expression of a punished puppy looking for forgiveness. Rocky couldn't stand that.

"Greg, it doesn't make sense," he said. "There's no sign of a struggle. And what about his false teeth being out? You wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"That's easily explained," a richly resonant voice broke in. It was Hugh Rawlins, the plastic dentist. He was standing next to the corpse, holding a tiny brush in his fingers. He was a square man, his bald head almost flat on the top, forming the opposite end to the square of his jaw. His shoulders were broad and box-shaped. His toes were square-tipped and heavy.

THIS little brush was on the floor, almost hidden under the rug," Rawlins explained. "It's used to clean false teeth. Rance was cleaning his teeth in the bathroom. When he

came out, holding them in his hand, he was stabbed. He dropped the brush and the teeth. I—"

"Put that back where you found it," Rocky Rhodes said quietly. "It's evidence."

Rawlins blinked, studying the quiet strength and toughness that showed in the detective's craggy face. He twirled the brush between square-tipped fingers briefly. Then he set it back on the floor, half under the rug.

Lew Jensen, head of Homicide, bustled in with some of his boys. After listening to the whole story, he told Rocky:

"It's open and shut. This thing happened just like your brother says. What else could it be? Unless you can find me a better suspect, we're taking him in."

Rhodes tightened his lips, rubbed a hand impatiently through his curly hair. "Of course he *couldn't* be covering anybody. He couldn't have loaned the knife to someone else and he figures *they* did it, and he's trying to shield *them*?"

Jensen's florid face grinned. He shrugged. "Listen, here, this ain't New York. We don't do things the hard way, here. . . . C'mon, Greg."

Greg Rhodes turned toward the door and Lew Jensen lumbered after him. Rocky clenched his fists against his sides in futile rage. In a few moments he went downstairs with the others.

Although the spirit of the party was broken, guests still lingered, some dressed to leave. They stood in little groups, talking in hushed whispers. Rhodes circulated, looking in vain for Donna Marlo. He spotted Harry Hunt the agent, and Hugh Rawlins the dentist, in a corner away from everyone else.

The two were engaged in an animated if not violent argument. Rawlins' square jaw was jutting, the blunt corners of his bald head glistening with sweat. Rhodes caught his rich, deep voice as he drew nearer, heard the tail end of what he was saying:

"And if you think I'm bluffing, just fail to show up!"

Hunt pulled at his fleshy nose, shifted his feet nervously. He started to reply, then spotted the New York detective. He turned to him.

"Oh, hello, Rhodes. Say, I'm sorry as hell about your brother. Anything I can do?"

"Same here, Rocky," Rawlins echoed.

"Either of you seen Donna?" Rocky asked.

"Not in the last few minutes," Rawlins answered. "Don't know where she is. Say, Rhodes, Harry and I were just discussing squash. He was bragging, and I told him I'd whip the daylights out of him any time he'd come down to my club. You play?"

Rocky shook his head negatively and moved away. He had just seen Donna Marlo pass along the hall. He caught her going out the front door.

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Oh, it—it's you, Rocky." She ran her fingers through the lustrous thickness of her dark hair. "I—I'm a little upset. I was going out to get some air."

THEY walked through the moon-glow to a secluded little summer-house out of sight and earshot of the house. The sheltered spot was heavy with the scent of roses and with Donna's own subtly inviting perfume.

"Rance's murder kind of got you down, hasn't it, Donna?" he said. His voice was soft. In the dark Donna could not tell that his eyes were cold and hard as granite.

She said: "I—I'd rather not talk about it, Rocky."

She hunched a soft shoulder, let her head drop back so that the milk-white curve of her throat gleamed in the moonlight. "You know, Rocky," she whispered, her long-lashed eyes fluttering. "You're not handsome; you're almost ugly, but I'll bet lots of women go for you. You're so tough, so hard. Your hair is nice, too, and so are your eyes."

The grip of his fingers bit into her arms. He said: "I came out here to talk about one thing, Donna. You're not sidetracking me. I'm a cop, on vacation from police work, but my brother is in trouble. *My brother!* We've stuck by each other since we were kids. Greg is straight, see? I know that. I'm not going to let him be an idealistic sap!"

She stiffened, tried to free her arms. Her sleek body squirmed, but Rocky held her arms fast. "What—what has that to do with me?" she cried. "You're hurting my arms!"

"Shut up and listen. Greg didn't kill Jack Rance." Rhodes took a deep breath and plunged into his lie. "Greg valued that knife. There's only one person in the world he'd give it to, outside of me. That's you, Donna. He gave it to you as a keepsake. Never mind how, but I know you had the knife.

"You killed Jack Rance with it, knowing Greg would be blamed. He realized that, took the rap for you because he's still so damned in love with you he's out of his mind!"

"No, no, Rocky!" Donna tossed her head. "You—you're right about Greg giving me the knife, but I didn't kill Rance. I kept the knife home in my bureau. Someone must have stolen it. He—"

The bushes rustled behind them. Before either could act a vague, shadowy figure reared up. Something swished through the air straight at Rhodes' head. Lightning-like reaction was all that saved him. He got one arm up and fended off the blow a little. The heavy chunk of wood didn't connect squarely with his skull.

Rhodes staggered back, a blood-red haze blinding him. Through it he saw a blurred vision of Donna shrinking back against the fence of the summerhouse, hand to mouth, stifling a scream. He couldn't see the man because he was standing in shadows. Then the inside of Rocky's head whirled like a roulette wheel. He acted purely on instinct after that.

The bludgeon struck again, but by now Rhodes had his neck hunched down into broad shoulders, alleviating the force of the blows. He staggered a few paces, plunged to his face.

ROCKY came to in a dancing white fog which slowly cleared. He crawled a few feet, worked some of the rubber from his legs and stood up. He brushed off dirt, dabbed sticky, half-dried blood from his ear and the side of his head. Then he retraced the few steps to the summerhouse.

He struck several matches, examined the ground. There were footprints and signs of a struggle in broken branches and trampled grass, but they didn't help much. The little white business card caught in the top of a rose bush did, though. Rhodes picked it up and read:

HUGH RAWLINS, D.D.S.

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Rhodes pocketed the card, pushed through the garden toward the house, found that all the guests had departed. He answered Abe Dortmann's anxious queries with a story about tripping and knocking his head against a garden bench.

Dortmann regarded him shrewdly. "Look, Rocky, I got a wad of dough tied up in your picture. Don't go wallowing around in this murder mess and crossing Lew Jensen. If shooting is held up even for a few days on this picture, it'll cost me—"

"The hell with your picture!" Rhodes snarled. "Listen, Dortmann, I'm going to get my brother out of this fall-guy rap if the only picture you ever have of me is in a coffin."

He wheeled toward his '35 sedan, tooled out onto Santa Monica Boulevard, headed toward town. He made the run from Beverly Hills to the Albon Building near the post office in fast time.

Charwomen were scrubbing the lobby and by flashing his New York shield, Rocky got them to let him in.

The directory told him Rawlins' office was on the third floor and he pounded up. No light showed under the office door. One of a big ring of skeleton keys he always carried turned the bolts and he entered, switched on the lights.

Rawlins had a suite. There was a lavishly furnished waiting room, with a safe in one corner, chairs and a table full of fan mags, old *Hollywood Reporters* and *Varieties*. Doors leading to rooms where Rawlins worked on his patients, and where they rested after especially physically trying work, were at opposite corners.

The safe was open the fraction of an inch. Someone not so trained to watch for details might have missed it. Rocky strode toward it, swung open the heavy door. The inside was in confusion, file boxes and card indexes emptied out, filtered through. Small bills and change from a petty cash box were scattered about.

Rocky examined some of the file cards and the names on them would have made a Hollywood *Who's Who*. Nearly every big picture star has to have some adjustments made on his teeth as even the slightest malformation is exposed to the frank eye of the camera. Rawlins had more than his share of big-time patients.

Rocky picked up a large, manila envelope. It had been sealed with wax, but the seals were broken open and the end of the envelope ripped. Rocky reached in, pulled out several photographs and negatives.

THE first showed a well-known starlet who was married to a big-shot director. She was seated in a dentist chair and a man was bending over her, his arms wrapped amorously around her. The man's face was hidden from the camera, but even from a rear view the squareness of the bald head and the shoulders left no doubt of his identity. It was Hugh Rawlins.

There were many other pictures, all similar, all featuring Hollywood

women, prominent in the industry and married to influential men.

"The lowest, rottenest kind of blackmail!" Rhodes said through clenched teeth.

He jammed the pictures into his pocket, turned toward the door of the patients' room. He stepped in, saw the dental chair with all the gleaming modern equipment. Across the room, one corner was draped with a velvet curtain. Rocky yanked it aside, saw the camera affixed to a wall bracket. The camera was aimed directly at the dental chair. It had a long cord rolled up and hooked next to it.

Under the excuse of painful work to be done, the dentist administered gas, swiftly set the stage and snapped the photo himself, using the long extension cord. It would take a few seconds and pay enormous dividends.

Here was possible motivation for Rance's murder. The columnist might have learned of the dentist's racket. Rawlins silenced him. But there was still Donna Mario's part in the thing and the whole picture was far from complete.

Rocky turned back toward the waiting room and a gunshot blasted the silence of the office. The bullet slammed into his shoulder and twirled him. It would have struck a more vital spot if he hadn't twisted toward the door just as the gun was fired. But Rocky didn't know anything about that. He heard the shot, felt the pain. There was a big splash of crimson and then a solid wall of black.

The first thing Rocky Rhodes saw after that was the big fair and florid face of Lew Jensen. Jensen was grinning like a kid who has caught the teacher with the principal. His words seeped gradually through Rhodes' clouded mind.

"You won the duel, Rocky, but it won't do you no good. There's a law against it."

The Eastern detective sat up, fighting off nausea. "What duel?" he managed. "What are you talking about?"

And then he saw the figure stretched out on the floor nearby, with the medical examiner bending over it. The room was full of cops.

"WHAT did you do with the guns?" Lew Jensen said. "How did you get rid of them before you passed out from the slug in your shoulder?"

"I don't carry a gun," Rhodes said hoarsely. He was looking at the corpse the M. E. was working on. All he could see were the feet sticking toward him, but that was enough. The shoes were blunt-toed and square. He knew that Hugh Rawlins, plastic dentist, was dead. Rocky added weakly: "I—I haven't carried a gun in years."

"Listen," Jensen said, voice rising along with his color. "We've got the whole thing set, so lay off. You and Rawlins were up here alone. It don't matter which of you pulled a gun first. You were both armed. You both fired almost at the same time, but your aim was better, Rocky. You got Rawlins right through the think-tank. You managed to chuck the guns out the window or something before you collapsed. But don't worry about us finding them. We will."

Jensen fished out handcuffs. "Stick out your wrists, big shot."

"I—I can't. My shoulder's killing me," Rhodes stalled. He felt for the wound, found a temporary dressing already in place. The ambulance surgeon had been working on him before he regained consciousness.

"Stop the stall," Jensen said. "Get up, and put on these bracelets."

Falteringly, Rocky Rhodes stood up. If he went to the clink, too, he would be stopped from trying to clear Greg. That couldn't happen. Greg was highly strung, emotional. No telling what he might do to himself, brooding in a cell.

"What about the blackmail pictures?" Rocky said, abruptly. "You get them?"

"What pictures?" Jensen's eyes narrowed.

Rocky told him about finding the photos. "I've got 'em in my pocket now." He hunched his wounded shoulder lamely. "They're in the jacket, this side. I can't reach them account of the shoulder. You fish 'em out."

Lew Jensen stuck his hand into Rhodes' pocket, his mouth screwed thoughtfully. Then he let out a howl of surprise as Rocky suddenly slammed his elbow down hard against his side, pinning Jensen's hand in his pocket, and throwing him off balance.

With his good hand Rocky shoved hard at the Homicide man's chest, hurling him backward toward a group of cops. There was a ripping sound as Rocky's pocket tore loose, but the thing worked. Jensen floundered back against the others and, by the time any of them recovered, Rocky Rhodes had slammed out the door.

Rocky dove toward a small, narrow door directly opposite. Yanking it open, he squeezed in fast between a clutter of mops and brooms. He pulled the door shut a fraction of a second before Jensen and his mob pounded noisily out into the hall.

WHILE the police covered roof, fire escapes and all regular means of exit, Rocky went to the rear of the narrow broom closet. He opened a tiny window, squeezed through and dropped to the roof of another building. From there he jumped to an alley on the far side. Then he had to stop and lean dizzily against the wall.

He put his hand to the pad of bandages at his shoulder, found it sticky with blood. Another couple of hours and he'd be too weak even to stand. He had to work fast. Recovering a little from his dizziness, Rocky hustled to the back of the alley, over rear yard fences, and came out on Sunset Boulevard near Cahuenga. He hit for an all-night drug store, changed a ten-dollar bill into change.

Rocky knew now that he'd been wrong. Rawlins wasn't the only one in on this. The dentist hadn't neces-

sarily been Rance's killer. But one of Rocky's ideas might still be productive, that Rance was killed because of something he had printed or might print in his column.

Squeezing into a phone booth, Rocky called his friend, Les Lee, managing editor of the *New York Recorder*.

He said: "Look, Les, I'm calling from the Coast and I'm in a jam. I want some info in a hurry. Your paper takes Jack Rance's syndicated column, doesn't it? . . . Read me the columns that came through this week, the unpublished ones. Start with the latest one and work back. Don't skip an item in any of them."

Lee called Rocky a few friendly names, clucked and left the phone. He came back reading bits of Hollywood gossip about big movie names. He was halfway through the second column when Rocky stopped him.

"Hold it, Les. Read that last item again, slowly."

Les Lee read: "I know you'll be interested to learn of the secret nuptials of Donna Marlo, singing star, and Harry Hunt, prominent Coast actor's agent. Donna, you know, is the warbling lovely, whose studio has been trying to figure out a way to cut the balance of her long-term contract. We know they'll be glad to hear about this. Heh-heh!"

"Thanks, Les," Rocky said and hung up. He went out, hailed a cab. He had a notion Jensen's boys were in possession of his own car, back at the Albon Building. The hack raced him over to Donna Marlo's place in Laurel Canyon.

Just before they reached the drive leading up to Donna's big, Spanish style bungalow, Rocky dismissed the cab. He staggered the rest of the way on wobbly legs, his head slowly becoming a high-speed merry-go-round. Halfway up the drive he stopped, leaned against a tree, summoned all of his reserve strength, then went on.

He didn't knock on the door. He twisted the knob, fell against it and

staggered on in. The entrance led into the living room. Donna was there in a gossamer negligee, kneeling on a stuffed suitcase, forcing down the lid. Rocky stumbled toward her, feet slipping under him on the highly waxed floor, and swaying like a drunk.

THE girl made squeaking noises and started to straighten up. Rocky put a hand on her shoulder.

"Stay like that," he told her. "I can slap you down better if you don't do as I say. Where's your husband?"

"My hus—" Donna's already pale features went ashen. She pushed thick dark hair away from her forehead. "I—I don't know what you mean."

"Stuff it," Rhodes stopped her. He held his tired eyes open only with great effort. "I know you're married to Harry Hunt. Jack Rance's column that's already been released will soon tell it to the world. I also know Harry killed Jack and then knocked off Hugh Rawlins. You know it, too. You're an accomplice, an accessory after the fact. You'll fry your pretty hide right with him unless you maybe help me out and spill all the little details."

"But—but I can't do that. Harry would—"

"Shut up, Donna!"

Harry Hunt stood in the doorway of the room, weaving a little black Spanish automatic in his fist. He stared at them through thick-lensed glasses like a puzzled human bullfrog. The nostrils of his bulbous nose flared and his mouth twitched to the pulsing of an inflamed nerve.

"You should have stayed in New York, Rhodes," he said raggedly. "Get out of the way, Donna. I'm going to do some exterminating. I think you're the only one who found out so much, Rocky, but anyhow it won't make any difference. Another killing won't hurt my record."

"Donna and I are going away. I was upstairs packing when you came in. Even if I was going to let you

live, Rhodes, her testimony wouldn't do you any good. She's my wife. You know that law. So now—"

"Don't be a damned fool, Hunt," Rocky broke in gaspingly. He strained to hold the killer's attention. "Others will figure it just like I did. You haven't got a chance."

Harry Hunt breathed hard through his big nostrils. His gun hand shook, but not enough to give Rocky a break. "Just how *did* you figure things?" he demanded.

Rocky's eyelids felt as though stone statues were perched on them. Pain flooded him, but he winced, kept his eyes open.

"Well, in the first place," he began, "the obvious motive for anyone killing Jack Rance would be revenge for something he had already printed, or to prevent him publishing some information he had recently acquired. In this instance it was the fact that you and Donna were secretly married. Rance must have made the mistake of mentioning his knowledge to you at the party.

"Donna's pretty and can sing, but can't act any better than a kid giving a charade. You knew the studio would seize this opportunity to toss her out. There must be a marriage clause in her contract. That's why you kept the wedding secret. Donna's salary, at a couple grand a week, would make a flock of greenbacks added up until her option came up. You weren't going to let Rance dish you out of all that nice cash."

"But the news didn't appear in Rance's column," Hunt rasped. "I read his piece every day. It hasn't appeared."

"Don't they send the column in written up well ahead?" Donna put in weakly.

"That's the answer," Rocky told them. "You struck a little late, Hunt. But even that would have been all right. If Greg hadn't taken the blame, suspicion would have pointed at Donna—except for one thing. Rance

was vain as a peacock. He had gone up to the privacy of the bedroom to clean his false choppers, preparatory to trying to make some babe at the party.

"He was stabbed in front, holding the teeth in his hand. That meant he *knew* the killer and that it wasn't a woman. Rance wouldn't have faced a femme minus his plates for all the rice in Chinatown."

Harry Hunt waggled the Spanish gun. "The hell with all this," he snarled. "I'm going to—"

ROCKY put out a hand. "Wait! That's not all, Hunt. Hugh Rawlins must have caught you right after the kill, but didn't let on right away. He waited until you left, then went in and placed the false teeth on the head of the polar bear rug. Then you'd know somebody was wise and would stew about it, and you'd be ripe for his blackmail proposish.

"Later when he gave me that hogwash that you two were arguing about squash, he was giving you the works, telling you to come down to his office and talk money or he'd tell what he had seen. When I went out in the garden with Donna, you followed. You attacked when Donna started to spill about how you had access to the knife. In the attack you dropped the card Rawlins had given you."

"That's why you came up to Rawlins' office!" Hunt snarled.

"Yeah. I thought it was Rawlins who attacked me, that he was the murderer. I thought it was cinched when I found that envelope full of blackmail pix in the safe."

"They ought to give me a medal for killing that slime!" Hunt rasped. His gun hand trembled as though he had the ague. "I discovered that hidden camera, figured Rawlins' racket, too. I was afraid he might have a shot of Donna in there and I wouldn't want anyone to get hold of it.

"I took the safe combo from his desk and opened up. Then I heard that

old jalopy of yours stop outside the building, looked out and saw you. I—"

"Hid, and shot me when the right time came," Rocky interrupted, biting his lip against the pain needling his whole body. "You had already plugged Rawlins rather than pay him off. You had hidden the corpse in one of the rest rooms when I came up. Then you dragged it out again. You left things so the cops would think Rawlins and I had shot it out, or that maybe I had killed the dentist, then inflicted a wound on myself."

Rocky's teeth clicked together. He had been studying Hunt closely, trying to gauge the second the murderer would break, squeeze trigger. But now Rocky's weakened legs gave. He buckled in a heap the same second the shot came. At first he thought it was because of the bullet that he had fallen. Then sounded the crash of a picture falling off the wall behind him, and he knew the collapse had saved his life.

More than that, it gave him a precious second of time. He grabbed the suitcase Donna had been kneeling on, slung it skidding across the waxed floor, straight into Hunt's legs.

Both men scrambled like two kids

on the revolving, slippery floor of a fun machine in an amusement park. But Rocky Rhodes didn't make the mistake of trying to stand. He crawled, reached Hunt as he got to one knee, leveled the gun again. Flinging his dead weight against Hunt, Rocky held him down with one arm and his last bit of strength, beat weakly and futilely with his other fist.

That was how Lew Jensen and the men from Homicide found him. Rocky went completely out when they pulled him away, but not before he told them:

"Hunt's your murderer. Don't let him get away!"

The taxi driver entered with a couple of uniformed cops. "Hell!" he exclaimed. "Good thing I got suspicious of that guy's bloody shirt!"

Rocky Rhodes read about the whole thing in the morning papers. And he learned that Jensen found the black-mail picture of Donna stolen from Rawlins' office, in Hunt's pocket. That was payoff evidence.

After he'd finished the papers Greg entered the hospital room. His small, pinched face was wreathed in a grin. He couldn't speak. He just pumped Rocky's good arm.



Crime on His Hands

By H. Q. Masur



CHAPTER I

MY FATHER used to say that Uncle Henry was the luckiest man in the world. Once when he was a boy on the farm he fell into the hog's feeding trough and came up with a ten dollar gold piece. Things like that. When he was ten he ran away from Nebraska and by the time

he was a young man he headed a large investment company.

I hadn't seen Uncle Henry in a long time. Dad was dead now and I'd been running the farm by myself for the past three years. Fair years, too—except for this last one. It hit me hard. First the frost and then that darn flood. A fellow couldn't make both ends meet nohow.

Young Don hadn't been in the big city twenty-four hours before he stumbled into a murder, became a rich man—and fell in love. But it was the love angle that made him a homicide suspect. For he offered himself as a sacrifice on the altar of chivalry.



That's why I came to the city.
I was unpacking my bag at the old Y, and there on top of my shirts was Uncle Henry's letter.

Dear Donald:

You write that you need twelve hundred dollars. Isn't that a lot of money for a farmer?

If you've been gambling you'll just have to make the best of it by yourself. The farm always was self-sustaining. Besides, I be-

lieve it builds character for a young man to weather his own financial storms.

UNCLE HENRY

Gambling? Gosh! Uncle Henry had me all wrong. I didn't even know one card from another. And what with all the chores to do I didn't even have time to get to town very often.

Even so the farm could have stood a bad season but for the mortgage.

It was a new mortgage and I'd taken it out only last winter. You see, Ethel—she's a cousin of mine—wanted me to buy out her share. Although she'd never lived on the farm she'd inherited through grandfather. And that's why I had taken out a mortgage, the first one in fifty years.

I guess you can see how much I thought of the farm. I loved that piece of ground. I loved tilling the fields and fixing the old barns and seeing the corn push up out of the soft earth, corn yellower than a newly minted gold piece.

I didn't want to lose it. I'd rather have lost my—my arm, I guess.

I got everything unpacked and then I called Uncle Henry on the phone. His office said that he wouldn't be back at all that day, but I could probably reach him at home in the evening.

New York is a pretty big place and there were a lot of things I wanted to see. But I didn't get to see any of them. Instead I went to Brooklyn to call on my cousin Ethel and her husband.

I hadn't seen Ethel ever since she was a kid in pigtails. She didn't have pigtails any longer and she wasn't gangly. Being married to Sam Fisher agreed with her. She'd gotten pretty fat. Sam was a big fellow with closely cropped blond hair that stuck about an inch straight up from his head. He had a square chin and blue eyes and worked for some chemical firm out on Long Island.

We chinned for about an hour until it got dark and I told them all about the farm and how things were going.

Sam said: "Come out and have dinner with us tomorrow."

I shook my head. "I wish I could, but I've got to catch the train back to Nebraska. That hired man of mine is liable to go off on a drunk and neglect the cattle. I'll write to you, though."

When I took the subway back to Manhattan I didn't know how wrong I'd been. Sure, I'd planned on going home the following day. But I didn't.

They wouldn't let me. The cops, I mean.

UNCLE HENRY lived on Park Avenue. That's a pretty swell street. Block after block of big fine houses, all of them with doormen in gaily colored uniforms. This house Uncle Henry lived in was about forty stories high. It made you dizzy to look at it.

"Mr. Henry Lambert," I said to the elevator man. "He's expecting me."

He wasn't really. I just thought I'd surprise him.

That elevator ride up to the twentieth floor made my stomach feel like churned butter. I guess my face was a little green when I pushed the bell. Anyway I had a long wait before a tiny bronze disk at eye level jerked up and an eye looked out at me.

It was a green eye. Or maybe it was topaz. Or even a mixture of the two. It stared out at me for a couple of seconds and then the disc swung back and that was all. The door didn't open. So I stuck my finger against the bell and way inside I could hear some muted bells. It wasn't a ring at all.

Suddenly the door opened and there was this girl standing there and staring at me.

"Go away, please," she said, and started to slam the door in my face.

It surprised me because she didn't look like that kind of a girl at all. I thrust my foot inside the jamb and she couldn't shut the door. She fell back a step and plugged the fingers of her left hand into her mouth. She made a kind of choked little cry deep inside her throat.

I couldn't understand it. Maybe I'm not the best looking fellow in the world, but I certainly don't look like Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi. Anyway, girls didn't usually look like they'd seen a nightmare when I appear.

I said: "I'm Mr. Lambert's nephew, Donald. I'd like to see him."

We were in kind of a hallway, a square room with statues against the wall. I hastily averted my eyes from

the statues because I was afraid they would make me blush. They were sort of Egyptian dancing girls and if somebody didn't cover them up soon they'd be liable to catch pneumonia.

The girl took her fingers out of her mouth and gulped twice. "I—I'm sorry, but your uncle isn't at home. Couldn't you come back some other time?"

I shook my head. "If you don't mind, miss, I'll wait for him."

She pointed to a chair. "Then sit down there."

I don't think I've ever seen such a pretty girl before. Her eyes weren't green or topaz at all. They were kind of a deep mottled gray. She was slender and soft and her hair was the color of corn in midsummer.

And she was scared. Anybody could see that. Really scared.

She separated a pair of drapes and went into an inner room. I saw her hat and coat lying on a chair and beyond the chair was a fireplace. Uncle Henry was lying beside the fireplace.

I couldn't really see his face because his arm was flung out covering it. But there was blood on his sleeve and a pool of blood on the floor. The hair at the side of his head was matted with it. Beside his hand and almost touching his fingers was a heavy brass poker.

I SAW all that the instant before the portieres swung back into place. It didn't take me long to jump out of the chair and burst into the room. I stood there staring at the girl who was slipping into her coat. My mouth was dry as a piece of sunburnt flannel.

The girl stopped putting on her coat. It was a yellow polo and she looked like a canary frozen in mid-flight. Her red lips were slightly parted and there was a feverish, frightened look in her mottled gray eyes.

I went around to the other side of Uncle Henry. He was dead, all right. His face had a waxen pallor and his eyes were still open, the pupils large

and dilated under a pair of thick-lensed glasses.

"Uncle Henry!" I whispered, shocked. Then I turned around to the girl. "Look here, miss—"

She was racing for the door, her yellow coat skirt flying. I chased her and pulled her back. She became a sudden tempest. Her nails scraped a furrow of skin off my cheek and I tasted blood on the corner of my mouth. She was breathing very hard, in great ragged gulps, like the splintering of wood, just before the slivers fly off. I have never seen anybody so frightened. She was scared green.

I grabbed hold of her arms so tight it must have hurt and I shook her like a cat rattled a ball of wool.

"Stop that!" I said. "Stop it!"

And then she collapsed and sort of fell apart. She became limp and her arms dropped to her sides. Her eyes rolled up and she started to fall like a crushed caterpillar. I guess if I hadn't been holding so tight she would have spilled to the floor.

But she soon had a grip on herself. I led her back to the ottoman and sat her down. The ottoman was upholstered in gold brocade and made a huge semicircle around one side of the room.

She was crying now, not so much tears of sorrow, but sort of a nervous reaction. It made me uncomfortable. I don't like to see girls cry. I waited until she got a grip on herself and then she looked up at me and her voice was thin.

"Please, let me go."

"Why did you kill him?" I asked.

Her head jerked and her eyes grew wide like two round jade discs.

"Me!" she breathed in a timberless voice. "Me! You think I killed him?" She tried to struggle off the ottoman again, but I barred the way. She sank back and her face was blank, wooden. "You're wrong," she said. "I didn't kill him. It—it was an accident. He fell. Yes, that's it." She swallowed eagerly. "He fell. He hit his head

against the poker and it must have killed him."

"Who are you?" I asked.

She clammed up tighter than a bear trap. Her mouth became a thin line across her face and she shook her head. I glanced around the room and spied the telephone on a carved walnut table.

"I'll have to call the police," I said.

I started across the thick carpet and was just reaching for the receiver when a strange voice, sharp and clipped, said:

"Just hold it, son."

It's funny, but in that instant I could hear the big colonial clock ticking, slow measured ticks like a man's muted footsteps across concrete. The sort of steps a man would take walking down the corridor to the electric chair.

CHAPTER II

TURNING, I found myself staring into a gun. It was a small gun of dull blue steel, but it looked very deadly, and the man who was holding it looked very serious.

He was a slender man, tall and very erect, with a bristly military mustache, and hard, bright blue eyes. He was dressed like a fashion plate, all in brown; brown spats, brown pin stripe suit, brown shirt and tie, suede shoes, and an ochre-colored Homburg.

I don't know how he'd got through the front door, for I distinctly remembered hearing the snap lock catch when I'd kicked it shut. He walked over to Uncle Henry, looked down at him, touched him with the pointed toe of his suede shoe and turned him over just a little. Uncle Henry's hand flapped sideways with a soft, padding sound.

"Say," I said, "don't do that!"

It wasn't right. It wasn't respectful.

The brown man clipped out, "Shut up, sonny," without looking at me.

His blue eyes were fixed on Uncle Henry and I don't think I'd ever seen so much grim satisfaction in a man's face. His lips were pulled up at the

corners, showing strong white teeth in an odd grin.

He straightened and his eyes darted around the room, stopped suddenly, and then he strode to a small chromium bar in the far corner. His back was to me when he stooped and picked the thing up, but I saw what it was. A woman's beaded purse. He dropped it into his pocket, swiveled on his heel and disappeared through the drapes. A second later I heard the door close.

It was very confusing. Extremely puzzled, I turned to the girl. Her face had a stricken, almost paralyzed expression on it. I snapped her out of it with a question.

"Who was that?" I asked. "Did you ever see him before?"

She nodded. "I've seen his pictures in the paper. His name is Albert Kenyon."

"What's he got to do with my uncle?"

Her brows lifted. "Didn't you know? Your uncle was going to get married—to Kenyon's wife, Gloria—that is, as soon as they could get their divorce. It was in all the gossip columns. Kenyon was putting up a fight. He didn't want to divorce his wife."

I let that simmer slowly through my brain. I couldn't understand a man wanting to hold onto a woman who didn't love him any more. But then I suppose there are many people like that, and it certainly made a good motive for murder. Maybe Kenyon thought that his wife would come back to him once Uncle Henry was out of the way.

But that idea was suddenly washed away when the girl spoke. It brought my attention back to her, reminding me that she'd certainly had more opportunity than anybody else to commit the murder. She'd been right here with Uncle Henry.

There weren't any servants around the house that I could see, and so he must have opened the door for her. She'd taken her hat and coat off. That meant that he was alive when she'd

arrived. Because if she'd come in and found him dead she would have run away immediately.

IT WAS mighty hard to believe such a thing about a girl like that. She didn't look like a murderess, but then you never can tell. People don't always look like what they really are.

I said: "I'm going to call the police. Maybe you'd better tell me who you are first."

She wet her lips. "I—I'm his secretary."

"What are you doing here at this time of day?"

"Mr. Lambert wanted to work this evening. There was a lot of correspondence he had to dictate."

"Just what happened?" I asked.

She swallowed some air inside her mouth. "When I first rang the bell he didn't answer. I knew he must be home and I kept ringing. Then he came to the door and he looked terrible. His face was deathly gray and he kept his fingers clutched against his chest. Almost immediately he started to choke. I ran into the kitchen for some water and when I came back to this room, I—I found him like this. He was dead."

She tried to brush the picture away with the back of her hand. I didn't tell her that I thought she was lying. My eyes had been searching around the room and I didn't see any notes or stenographer's book.

"Why didn't you call a doctor?" I asked.

Her face twisted. "I saw all that blood. I guess I was scared. I wanted to run away and then you rang the bell. At first I thought you'd go away if I didn't answer, but you kept ringing."

I waited for her to continue.

She said: "I didn't want to be found here with him. I was afraid the police might think I struck him."

"Why would they think that?"

She shook her head and her voice rose on a hysterical note, wild, frantic.

I thought she was going to fly off.

"Why! Why! Why don't you leave me alone? I can't stand it here any longer. You're a beast to make me stay."

So it was the bell that had stopped her from running away. I'd arrived just in time. That soft, muted gong sound had caught my Uncle Henry's killer. And then, almost as if it had read my thoughts, the gong sounded.

I guess because I wasn't expecting it, it gave me quite a start. And also it played that four-note tune, deep, resonant, hollow-sounding. The girl's eyes widened. A faint queasy feeling crawled up my back.

I went to the door and opened it.

The palm of the man's hand pushed flat against my chest and shoved me back. He was about thirty years old and he wasn't wearing any hat or coat. His face was tan and his lips were tucked inward and his eyes bright with anger.

"Get out of my way," he snapped. "I'm going to see Lambert if it's the last thing I do. He can't stall me any longer."

He rushed through the portieres with me right behind him. He rushed through and he stopped short as if he'd smacked up against a stone wall, taking the whole picture in with one swift look. He landed on both feet, with his knees slightly bent like a chimpanzee.

"Sally!" He breathed, his voice a hoarse whisper.

The girl jumped up and her eyes began to glow.

"Paul! Paul!" she cried.

IN FOUR long paces he was at her side, his eyes turned on the body sprawled over by the fireplace. I saw the muscles of his face contract like a fist. His voice had a sudden shaken quality to it.

"Sally," he started, "you didn't—"

And the brows jitted together over his eyes as he cut the words short and glared at me.

The girl said in an anguished voice:

"Oh, Paul, why did you come back? Why didn't you stay away?"

"Come back!" He frowned. "But I haven't been here before. I went for a turn around the park first, trying to think things over. Then I decided there was no other way, so I came here to have a showdown with Lambert."

I decided it was time for me to butt in.

"Listen," I said, "my uncle has been killed, murdered, and I'd like to know who you are."

He didn't pay any attention to me. Instead he walked over to Sally and took hold of her shoulders and asked: "Tell me what happened. Everything."

She did. She told him the same story she'd already told me. How Uncle Henry had seemed sick, how she'd run to the kitchen for some water, and came back to find him dead, struck over the head with the poker.

I headed determinedly for the telephone. This time nobody was going to stop me. It was high time the police took charge. I picked up the receiver and this fellow Paul said:

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to notify the authorities."

"I think you'd better take a look at this first, before you do anything."

He put his left hand in his pocket and took out an envelope and brought it to me. I glanced at it and saw the words *Lambert Investments* printed in the upper left-hand corner. It was addressed to Paul Benson, Parkview Apartments. I started to open the envelope and the lightning struck.

I was caught completely unprepared. And I doubt if a man was ever hit much harder. I never saw it coming because I was concentrating on the letter, and so I made absolutely no move to protect myself.

He was strong and he knew how to use his fists. The blow crashed against the side of my chin. I don't exactly have a glass jaw, but my head snapped back like the recoil of a gun. I went reeling across the room which

was suddenly revolving in tight little circles. Then the floor heaved up like a log and caught me against the base of my skull. I saw a blinding flash and then a great darkness swallowed me.

I remember thinking: *He didn't knock me out. It was the blow against my head.*

I GUESS it couldn't have been very long, and yet when I opened my eyes there was a circle of faces around me and I could see uniforms—policemen's uniforms.

A very fat man was questioning a Filipino.

"You found them both like this, eh?"

The Filipino bobbed his head. "Yes, sir. Master Lambert dead, sir. Strange man here on floor. I think maybe they have fight."

"Skip the conclusions, Ecija. You called us right away?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

I turned my head away from the ammonia fumes somebody was holding against my nose and a voice said: "He's coming around now, Hallock."

The fat man left the Filipino and watched me get up. He was wearing a loose tweed suit that fitted like a burlap bag. He was very fat. His jowls sagged like a lion's and he had three or four chins. He had a big yellow handkerchief in his hand and he kept mopping at his forehead which was sweating.

He didn't look very much like my idea of a detective. His eyes made me uncomfortable. They were small and shiny, like small pellets of polished coal. He had a quiet manner of speaking and he said:

"You're the old boy's nephew, eh?"

"Yes, sir." I swallowed and gingerly tested the back of my head.

He looked concerned. "How'd you get hurt?"

I opened my mouth to tell him about the fellow and the girl—Sally and Paul—but then I changed my mind. I didn't know where the girl fitted in and there was something

about her that I liked. I guess I was foolish, but it was an impulse and I gave way to it. Instead I said:

"I think his name was Kenyon, a tall chap with a military mustache. There was a woman here with him. I didn't get much of a look at her. I came in and said that I'd like to talk to Uncle Henry and then I saw him on the floor."

"What happened?" Hallock asked.

"I don't know. I think Kenyon hit me and knocked me out."

"How do you know his name was Kenyon?"

That almost got me. My chest gave a thump, but I guess I concealed my confusion pretty well because he gave no sign of having noticed anything.

I said: "I'd seen his picture in the papers. I knew his wife was going with my uncle."

"When did you get into New York, Donald?"

I wondered how he knew my name and then I saw my wallet in his hand. He also had the letter Uncle Henry had written to me about the twelve hundred dollars I'd tried to borrow. I told him the truth because he could easily check up on it.

"Only this afternoon," I said. "I got in on the two o'clock train."

"And you came straight here?"

"No, sir. I visited some relatives in Brooklyn first."

Hallock pursed his lips and watched a police photographer take a flash of Uncle Henry. A dapper little man was dusting powder around the furniture and I guessed he was taking fingerprints.

CHAPTER III

THE man who'd held the ammonia bottle to my nose came away from Uncle Henry and handed Hallock a printed sheet of paper.

"Here's the D. O. A. form," he said. "Killed instantly from a blow on the head."

I was to learn later that D.O.A. simply meant Dead On Arrival. Hal-

lock glanced at the letter again and then looked up at me. His black eyes were bright.

"You were trying to borrow twelve hundred dollars from your uncle, eh, Donald?"

"That's right, sir. You see, we had a bad crop last season. No crop at all, really. First there was the frost and then—"

"Yeah." He cut me short. "Just skip all that, Donald. People always have a motive for borrowing money. From this letter it seems that you were having trouble. Your uncle didn't want to lend it to you, eh?"

"Well, that's what he wrote in the letter, sir. But I was sure if I came to New York and explained it to him he'd change his mind. Twelve hundred dollars isn't very much to a man like Uncle Henry. He's very—"

"Yeah." Hallock had soft thick lips and he pushed them out thoughtfully. "And now that he's dead, Donald, I guess you'll get all his money."

I felt my head jerk up. I glanced at him with a kind of shock. That thought had never really entered my mind. You see, I couldn't really believe that Uncle Henry was dead. I mean this thing was sort of a nightmare. And then suddenly it came home to me. Gosh! I was rich! Really rich. Beyond anything I'd ever dreamed. It gave me a queer feeling.

"Well," I gulped, "there's my cousin Ethel. We're his only two living relatives."

There was a strange silence in the room. Hallock was standing in front of me, with his heavy red neck inched out of a limp soiled shirt, watching me with those eyes of his, as black as midnight. The other men in the room were grouped around me, all staring at me with a peculiar silent intensity. Their faces were grim, hard-jowled.

And then my stomach did a flip-over. It just squeezed tight and contracted and jolted over upside down.

I saw the whole thing now. I saw it plain as daylight. I knew what they were thinking. That maybe Uncle

Henry had flatly refused to lend me the money, that I got desperate and started arguing with him. And then maybe Uncle Henry had tried to throw me out. I felt my eyes begin to pop out like cherries on a hat. You couldn't mistake it. It was in their faces. They were thinking that I had killed Uncle Henry to get his money.

My lips were dry and I wet them with the tip of my tongue and stood there without saying anything. I was scared. Badly scared. Because I'd lied about finding Kenyon in the apartment. If they proved that was a lie then they'd think everything else I'd said was a lie.

What a fool I'd been! Trying to protect Sally and this fellow Paul. And purely on an impulse too. When they hadn't played fair with me at all. They'd walked out on me, left me flat. Turned the basket of eggs over my head and dropped the whole thing in my lap.

NOBODY said anything. I could hear them breathing and could feel their eyes drilling into my face. My hands grew moist and cold, like two lumps of dough in an icebox. Beads of sweat started to trickle down my forehead. Good Lord above! I wished somebody'd say something, do something. Anything. I couldn't stand this silence much longer. The big colonial clock was ticking, those soft metallic clicks and I thought again that it sounded like footsteps walking along the concrete to the electric chair.

I was sweating real hard now and I'll bet I looked guilty. And then the dapper man who'd been sprinkling powder all around, laid the brass poker on the table and said:

"Sorry, Hallock. Not a print on it."

The fat man juttied his head in my direction. "How about his?"

"Only on the telephone and at that they're badly jumbled."

I looked and saw that the balls of my fingers were stained with ink and I knew they'd taken my prints while

I was unconscious. Hallock was smiling now, only it wasn't really a smile. His lips were pulled up at the corners showing his teeth.

"So you got into New York today and you saw Kenyon's picture in the papers."

I gulped audibly. "Yes, sir."

"Even though there was nothing in any of today's papers about Kenyon."

I didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything to say.

Hallock's big lion face pushed closer out of his collar like a turtle sticking his head out. His eyes were keen, level, glinting like black ice. His voice was very soft.

"Now, Donald, who was the young blond fellow who came up here after you did and then left with the girl?"

"I—I don't know what you mean."

There I was, still trying to protect two people I didn't know. I started with one story and I meant to stick to it. I couldn't begin to double-back now.

"You know what I mean, all right, Donald," Hallock said. "The elevator operator told us exactly who came and went at this floor. We know that Kenyon arrived after you did, not before."

I stared at him. I thought fast. My brain was going around like a feather in a whirlpool. I said: "I'm all mixed up. The shock of finding Uncle Henry dead has—"

Hallock cut me short with a weary gesture. His voice suddenly cracked out: "Do you know what the penalty for murder is?"

My face went white. "Y-yes, sir."

"They shave your head and slit your trousers, Donald, and they strap you into a chair. Sometimes they have to carry you into the death room. When they turn on the juice you give a jerk, Donald, a hard jerk as if you're trying to break the straps. But you're not. No, Donald, it's the death spasm. You can almost smell the flesh burning. You turn black, like a charred smelt. And then they toss you into a sack and drop you into a hole in the ground."

TSD

"If you're convicted of murder the judge has to sentence you to the chair. That's the law. But not if you confess. If you confess you can beat the chair and take a life term. Now, why don't you be a good fellow, Donald, and make it easy for us? Why don't you tell the truth? You'll feel better. It'll take a load off your mind. Believe me, boy, I know."

HALLOCK finished talking and took a deep breath. That was a long speech for Hallock, I imagined. But I didn't cringe. I had pretty good hold of myself. I didn't back away and turn green like he maybe expected. I held my hands tightly against my thighs and drew myself up and said stoutly:

"I didn't kill my uncle. Yes, maybe I did tell a couple of lies, but it was only to protect somebody."

Hallock rubbed his huge paws together. "Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Who were you trying to protect, Donald?"

"A girl. The one who left with the blond man."

"And who was she?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I found her here when I came. Uncle Henry was dead then, but I don't think she killed him."

"Why, Donald?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I just don't think so, that's all. You can tell a killer when you see one. She didn't have that kind of a face."

"And what kind of a face does a killer have, Donald? Is it anything like yours? Especially when there's a matter of a quarter of a million dollars to be gained?"

I put it to him stoutly. "I don't care about the money. I wouldn't kill for ten times that. I wouldn't kill anybody for all the money in the world."

And I meant it too. There was something about just being alive that made me blow inside. On the farm it's the smell of the new cut hay and the solid earth under my feet and the warmth of the sun and the beauty of twilight.

It's hearing the dog bark and seeing him romp. The thin cry of the calf, and the wonderful sound of the rain against the roof. I remembered then how I felt when old Bess's first calf died. It was like putting a grappling hook in my stomach and twisting it.

Couldn't I make them understand that? Couldn't I make them see that it was impossible for me to have killed Uncle Henry?

There was a burly plainclothes detective standing beside Hallock who hadn't said a word so far; only listened with a contemptuous sneer spread across his beet-red face. He took one step forward and hit me against the cheek with the back of his hand. It knocked me back onto the ottoman.

"C'mon," he snarled. "We're wasting time with the weasel, Hallock. I can make him talk. He's lying. Everything he said has been a lie. Get up, you!"

He grabbed me by the necktie and yanked me off the seat so that my face was stuck up close against his. There was alcohol on his breath and I could see the large pores that studded his clublike nose.

"Talk, Donald, talk, or we'll strap you into the chair so tight the juice'll come out of your ears."

The knot of my necktie had jammed up so tight against my Adam's apple it was choking me, I felt my face flush and the breath exploding in my nostrils.

I didn't like this man. I didn't like anything about him. I brought my knee up into his midriff. The air whistled out of him with a loud *whoosh* and he fell back, doubled over with pain.

IT LASTED only a minute. He straightened and his jaws were ridged whitely with anger. Red veins streaked his eyes and anger slashed across his face like a thunderstorm. He stared at me for a second and then his voice blasted like a furnace.

"That does it, punk! I'll kill you!"

I guess more than anything else he

was sore at being made a fool of before the other men. He started toward me with his great spatulate fingers spread out, tense.

It was Hallock who stopped him, pulled him up short with his soft command just as effectively as if he'd blocked his path.

"That'll be enough of that, Greer. I'm in charge here."

This Greer made a low animal sound deep in his throat and let his hands fall against his sides, great balls of muscled bone. His eyes were slitted and drilling at me with hatred. I knew I'd made an enemy who would try to even his score at any cost.

A cop came in from the foyer and said: "There's a girl here to see you, Hallock."

"Bring her in."

And there she was!

I just stood there and stared at her and my heart was hammering hard against my ribs. The gray eyes, the corn-colored hair, the drawn look on her wonderfully sweet face. Sally!

She looked at me and not at Hallock when she spoke. "I—I had to come back. I saw the police cars downstairs and I was afraid you would blame—"

I felt myself get husky inside.

Hallock's thick lips wreathed into a soft, reassuring smile. "Ah, so you came back because you were afraid we'd accuse Donald. That's nice, Miss—"

"Benson—Sally Benson."

"Here, sit down, Miss Benson."

Hallock took her arm and led her to a chair. He was all smiles and slick as an oil stain. He fawned on her.

"Now, let's get this straight. You were the girl who was here with Lambert when Donald arrived."

"Yes, sir."

"And not Kenyon. He came later— isn't that so?"

She nodded. "Y-yes, sir."

Hallock rubbed his hands in a washing motion. "That's fine. You see, the truth always pays, Donald. It always comes out in the end." He turned

his shrewd dark eyes to Sally again. "Lambert was dead when Donald arrived, eh?"

"He was," she answered in barely audible voice.

"But you didn't kill him, did you, Miss Benson?"

"No."

"He was alive when you got here, wasn't he?"

She nodded without replying.

"Suppose you tell us what happened."

SALLY moistened her lips and kept her eyes straight ahead, dazed almost. "I—I think he was sick. He got some kind of an attack. I ran into the kitchen for some water. When I got back he—he—was on the floor—"

"With his head mashed in by that poker, eh Miss Benson?"

She swallowed and her eyes were pain-filled. I couldn't stand it any longer.

I said swiftly: "She didn't kill Uncle Henry. She only came here because she thought her—" I choked the words against my clenched teeth. I didn't know who this fellow Paul was, or what he was to her, and I didn't want to get him into trouble. If Sally wanted to talk, then it was up to her.

"Yes?" Hallock prompted in a quiet wheedling voice. "Who did you think it was, Miss Benson?"

She got the swallow down. "I thought Paul had come here."

"Ah, and who is Paul?"

"My—my brother."

A little spasm of gladness went through my heart. I'd thought maybe Paul had been something more to her than a brother. Hallock started washing his hands in the air again.

"Tell me, Miss Benson, what did your brother have against Henry Lambert? The truth, of course. We'll find out anyway."

Her brow creased up in deep thought. Then, apparently she made up her mind to speak.

She said firmly: "Just before he

died, father turned his money over to Henry Lambert to be the trustee for Paul and me. That was about a year ago. Then, last week, Mr. Lambert wrote us that all our investments had turned out badly. That there was no more money left. He sent us an accounting.

"Paul had studied law and although the investments were legal, he thought Mr. Lambert had been very careless in the ones he'd chosen. He even suspected Mr. Lambert of switching certain of his own securities that may have turned out to be lemons.

"He tried for several days to get in to see Mr. Lambert, but he always seemed to be getting brushed off. Then, today, he decided to have it out with Mr. Lambert. He left the house. I—I guess he was angry, so after a while I followed him here. But he hadn't arrived yet."

Hallock said: "And you were here all alone with Lambert when he died?"

"How does she know?" I said. "Somebody may have sneaked in while she was in the kitchen. Kenyon had a key. He came in without ringing."

Hallock ignored me. "Bring Paul Benson in," he said to Greer. "We're holding the girl on suspicion of homicide. . . . You, Donald, where're you staying?"

"At the Y," I told him.

"Good enough. Stick around town in case we need you." And he turned away.

I looked at Sally, but her eyes were averted. Her face had that taut, wrenched look on it that seemed to make my heart curdle. I'd seen Uncle Henry's Filipino servant head toward the kitchen, and since nobody was watching me now, I followed him there.

CHAPTER IV

ECIJA was a small brown fellow who didn't weigh more than a hundred and thirty pounds, but he was wiry and hard-bodied. He had nice

teeth and kept smiling at me, but there was something wrong with his eyes. The pupils were unnaturally dilated and he would blink and squint and shake his head as if he had a headache.

"You Mister Lambert's nephew," he said, grinning.

I nodded and sat down at the enameled kitchen table. He took a pot of tea off the stove and poured a cup for himself. He asked if I'd have one, but I shook my head.

"Where were you all day, Ecija?" I asked.

"Afternoon off," he grinned. "Go dancing. Fifty hostesses—very pretty. Have fine time."

He found a small pasteboard box, took out a white tablet and dropped it into his tea. It dissolved quickly.

"Medicine?" I asked.

"Oh, no." He smiled and held the box up for me to see the word saccharin printed on the label. "Better than sugar. Keeps me skinny, very hard."

"Ecija," I said, "tell me something about my uncle and this woman, Gloria Kenyon. Did he really love her?"

"Oh, yes. She very beautiful." He blinked his eyes again.

"When did he last see her?"

"Today. She visiting with him when I leave this afternoon. Mister Lambert very fond of her, oh, yes."

"Where does she live, Ecija?"

"In Hotel Alverne. Right around corner."

I thanked him and left through the kitchen door. Then I went down to the street by the service elevator. I didn't want to walk through the living room and see all those cops surrounding Sally. I didn't think I'd be able to stand that frightened, haunted look on her face.

I walked around the block and found that the back of the Alverne was jammed up against the back of Uncle Henry's house. I went into the lobby, not knowing exactly what I intended to do. I saw a telephone

booth and went into it and called my cousin Ethel. Sam answered the phone. Ethel had gone out to do some shopping.

"Sam," I said, "I have some bad news. Tell Ethel that Uncle Henry died this evening."

"Died!" Sam was shocked. I could hear him catch his breath. "When? How did it happen?"

"The police say he was killed, hit over the head with a poker. I guess that's the way it happened. They tried to blame me at first, but then they let me go."

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "This'll hit Ethel pretty hard."

I hung up and went over to the desk clerk and learned that the Kenyon apartment was on the twenty-first floor. That was two short of the top. I took the elevator up to the twenty-second and climbed the last one to the roof. It was a pretty busy hotel and nobody paid any attention to me. I looked down over the parapet and got dizzy. Down in the street the cars snaked along like a caterpillar and the people looked like tiny squat bugs.

I found that I could cross over from the Alverne roof to the building where Uncle Henry lived. A door there led to the stairs. I didn't walk down to Uncle Henry's apartment, but instead I went back to the Alverne.

WHEN I pressed the buzzer on the Kenyon door the woman who answered almost took my breath away. I just stood there gulping at her.

She was wearing a gown of some green gauzy stuff and it showed off her full figure. Her complexion was like cream and her red hair seemed to be on fire. Her eyes were a kind of greenish-blue and her mouth was redder than a ripe tomato.

I said: "Can I talk to you, Mrs. Kenyon? I'm Henry Lambert's nephew, Donald."

She didn't have any eyebrows, just a pencil line that curved over her eyes

like a drawn bow. She lifted them up and her eyes narrowed. At first I thought she was going to close the door on me, but then she seemed to change her mind and she opened it.

"Come in, Donald," she said, and led the way into a large living room. "Sit down. How is Henry?"

"Dead," I said, giving it to her with both barrels. "He was murdered."

I guess I was more surprised than she was. Because she didn't show any reaction at all, none whatsoever. Her face had a blank, wooden look and she just stared at me.

"I thought you were in love with him," I said.

Her lips barely moved. "What did you come here for, Donald?"

"Well," I said, "you were with him this afternoon. You knew—"

"How did you find out?"

"Ecija told me."

"The Filipino!" She sat erect and her eyes looked like two frozen jade discs.

"I knew you were there anyway," I said. "You left your purse."

Her head jerked. "What's that? What did you say?"

"Your purse," I told her. "Your husband came for it. Why? I want to know why, Mrs. Kenyon. Is it because something had happened to my uncle? What made you leave without your purse? And why did your husband come to Uncle Henry's apartment to retrieve it? Why didn't you just wait until he could send it over, if he could?"

Her face had become a little waxen and now her voice lacked timbre. "Have you told any of this to the police?" "No—" I shook my head. "Not yet, but I think I will."

She came over to me and put her hands on my shoulders and I could smell the scent of some exotic perfume. Her face was very close to mine and I tried to inch away, but she wouldn't let me.

"Listen, Donald, I'm going to tell you the truth. I was with your uncle this afternoon. He was planning to fly

with me to Reno so that I could get my divorce from Albert. We were talking about it, and then all of a sudden he stood up and grabbed his chest and started cursing. His face became terribly hideous. He fell on the floor. I tried to talk to him. I rubbed his wrists. Nothing helped.

"I didn't want to be found there with him. I thought he was dead. I ran away and left him there like that. When Albert came home I told him what had happened." She added simply: "Albert is in love with me, always has been even though he knew about Henry Lambert. He said he would go back and recover my purse. I had a key to your uncle's apartment and I let him have it. I didn't know anybody would be there. I remembered it was Ecija's day off."

"Where is Mr. Kenyon now?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. He hasn't come home since he left me to get the purse."

I BIT on my lips for a moment and then I asked her: "Couldn't he have sneaked your key away and had a duplicate made, one that would let him spy on you and Uncle Henry?" And I thought to myself: *A key that would let him into the apartment so that he could kill Uncle Henry.* . . .

"You're a very bright boy," a voice jerked my head around to the doorway. "A very bright boy. Too bright, I might even say."

Albert Kenyon had come in very silently. His tall, hard frame filled the doorway and his right hand was in his topcoat pocket. His eyes were as hard and dull as nailheads and his mustache seemed to bristle like copper wire. A sardonic grip was on his face.

"I see the police have let you go," he clipped.

I nodded.

"That means they don't suspect you any longer. It also means that you'll inherit a nice piece of change from

your uncle's estate. I suppose you'd like to live to enjoy it."

I nodded again. Those eyes of his held me with the same paralyzed fascination that a snake charmer's flute holds for a cobra. I did not say anything. His wife was still seated beside me, her hands on my shoulders, her soft full body flung half across mine.

A very awkward situation for a fellow like me who never had any experience in things like that.

"Then get up on your feet," Kenyon snarled, "and get out of here. Go back home where you came from. Don't get mixed up in things you can't finish. I have half a mind to kill you right now."

"Listen, Albert," Mrs. Kenyon said, "you don't understand. I was—"

"Get out!"

I pushed her away and got up. My heart was contracted inside my chest like a tight knot. It wasn't really fear. I'm not sure what I felt. But I walked past him because I wanted to get out of there and give my churning thoughts a chance to think things out more clearly.

I had some dinner and I walked aimlessly around the park. It was late, very late, when I returned to the Y. I was exhausted. I got undressed and climbed into bed. But it was hard to fall asleep. Too many things had happened. First I'd stumbled into a murder. Then I suddenly found myself a rich man. And now I was in love.

I didn't fool myself about that. Ordinarily I'm shy with girls. My emotions have always been boxed up like a mousetrap. One thing I knew, though. I was in love with Sally Benson. It had hit me clean and it had hit me hard.

Working a farm like I do you sort of get to be a fatalist. Whatever has to happen will happen. Frosts and floods and good crops. Living so close to the earth you have more respect for religion. So we always tell our-

selves that everything happens for the best.

And there's no doubt that it was all for the best that I couldn't sleep that night. I was in that twilight zone between slumber and wakefulness when I heard the faint scratching in the lock of my door. My eyes blinked open, but the rest of my body did not move.

IT WAS very dark except for a thin sliver of light from a pale moon that slanted through the cracks of the drawn shade. My eyes were fixed on the door and as I watched I saw it move inward. There was a dark shadow in the doorway, visible by the dim hall light. And then the door closed very softly and the shadow melted into the room's darkness.

I guess I had a moment of blind, cold panic. I felt that I could not move, that I was dumbly transfixed and bound onto the bed. I made no effort to get up. I could only keep my eyes glued on the black outline as it moved closer to me. I couldn't even cry out. My mouth was dry and a great lump was wedged back against my throat.

And then, in that very dim light from the moon, I saw something else. A faint glint of steel. Steel upraised above the apparition's head, poised to strike. My hands were sticky and my whole body was wreathed in a cold, clammy sweat.

The outline came closer, loomed above my bed and there was no mistaking the knife in his hand. I could hear the noise of his breathing, low and raucous.

The wonder of it was that I moved at all. But I did. Self-preservation is an instinct, born into us. I gave a great sucking gulp and a hoarse yell and flung myself sideways off the bed. Just in time. The blade flashed down and made a ripping noise through the mattress. My would-be assassin gave a low cry of baffled rage and threw himself on the bed to reach over for me.

My hand touched something on the floor. My shoe. It was a heavy-soled, out-door type. I grabbed it and swung with all my might. It caught the fellow against the wrist and the knife clattered out of his hand to the floor. I jumped up, but I was too late.

I could see his back outlined against the open door and his feet went pounding down the narrow corridor. I stubbed my toe against my other shoe and spilled headlong to the floor.

I shook myself and got up and turned on the light, badly shaken. My face was chalk-white in the bureau mirror. My hands were trembling and a cold feeling gripped my stomach. I locked the door and jammed a chair up against it under the knob.

On the floor, near the wall, its six-inch steel blade glittering wickedly, lay a bone-handled knife. I had a momentary vision of myself stretched out on the bed, with a hideous expression frozen on my face, the bone haft jutting straight up from my chest.

I picked the knife up by the blade and wrapped it carefully in a face towel. I shoved it under the bathtub against the wall. There was a knock on the door. It gave me quite a start and I realized how badly frayed were my nerves.

"Who's there?" I cried hoarsely.

"Sam—it's Sam Fisher."

I pulled the chair away and let him in.

"Say, what kind of a nuthouse is this?" Sam asked.

I stared at him. He looked as if he'd been through a concrete mixer. The side of his face was bruised and scraped and blood drooled from his nose. His coat and pants were smeared, his hair disheveled.

"What happened?"

He started brushing himself off. "I was climbing the stairs when some lunatic came rushing down them like a shot out of hell and ran smack dab into me, knocked me down two full flights, jumped over me and kept on going without so much as an 'excuse, please'."

CHAPTER V

EXCITEMENT coursed through me. I grabbed Sam's arm. "Did you see him? Did you get a look at him? What did he look like?"

Sam frowned. "I got only a quick glimpse, but I remember he was dressed all in brown and had a stiff Fuller-brush mustache. I think I might recognize him again. Why, Don?"

"Because that man just tried to kill me," I said softly. Kenyon, I thought, Albert Kenyon. The description could fit nobody else.

Sam let out a whistle. "No! Say, this thing is getting wilder every minute. First Uncle Henry and then you! Why, what's he got against you, Don?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure. I believe he thinks I may have stumbled onto something. Sam, I think Kenyon killed Uncle Henry."

"Jealousy?" Sam asked.

"Exactly. He was afraid his wife was going to leave him. He's madly in love with her. I doubt if he'd stop at anything to keep her."

Sam sat down on the edge of the bed, took out a handkerchief and held it against his nose. "You'd better be careful, Don. A guy like that would stop at nothing."

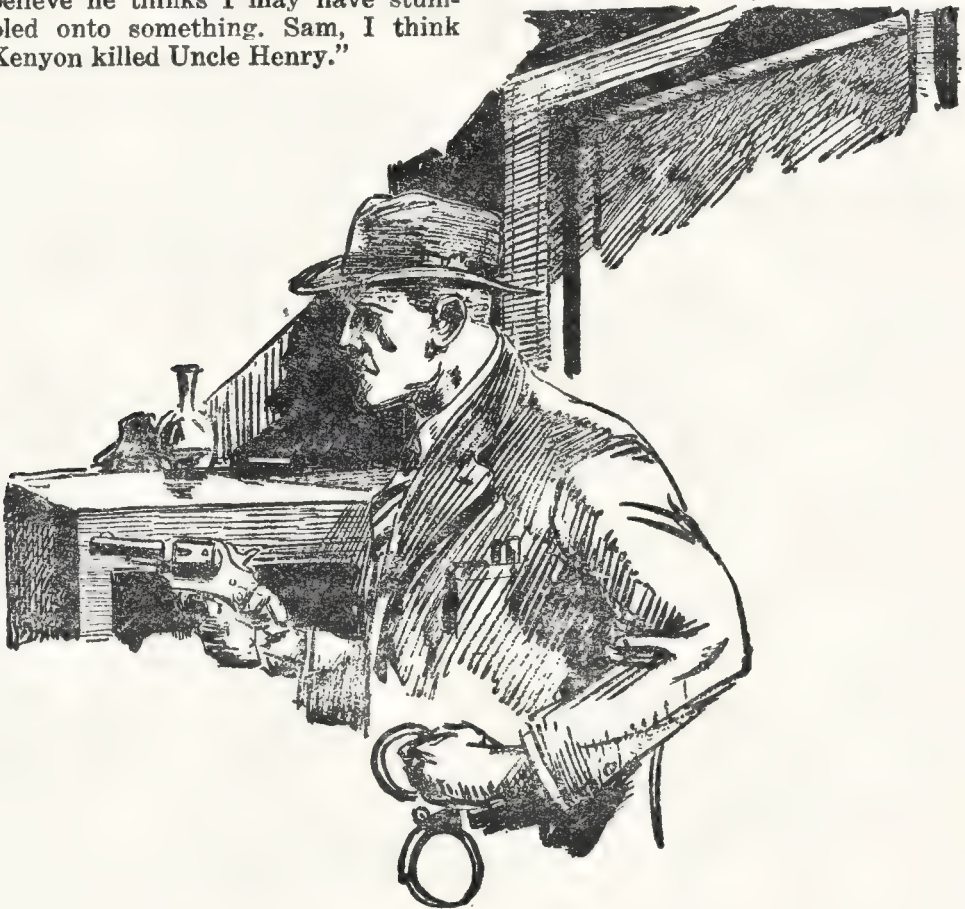
"I'll certainly be glad to get back to the farm after Uncle Henry's funeral. I've had enough of the city."

Sam looked up. "Did he have a gun?"

"No, a knife. Luckily, I woke up in time to scare him away."

"Whew!" Sam exclaimed. "Can you imagine if I'd walked in here and found you dead? What a shock!"

Reaction set in and my legs felt



watery. I sank into a chair, mopped the perspiration from my forehead. "Does Ethel know about Uncle Henry yet?"

"No," Sam said. "She hasn't seen the papers and I haven't told her. Frankly, I didn't know how to put it to her. She was very fond of the old gent and this murder business is going to upset her. You probably don't know, but she's not well. The doctor says she mustn't have any excitement. That's why I came here tonight. I wanted to discuss it with you, to find out if there isn't some way you can get her up to the farm until it blows over."

"You mean keep the whole thing a secret from her?"

"Yes, for a week or so, that's all."

I shook my head. "I don't see how, Sam. She'll have to be present when the estate is probated. There are papers that have to be signed. And I guess the police may want to ask her a question or two. I don't see how it can be avoided."

His eyes were clouded and he looked troubled. "Then we'll just have to put it to her as softly as possible."

I nodded. We sat around for another half hour, jawing, and then Sam left. I jammed the chair back against the door and went to bed.

Sleep was out of the question, but toward morning I managed to fall into some kind of a stupor. Sheer exhaustion it was.

UNCLE HENRY'S lawyer called on the phone and wanted me to meet him at the apartment. About the estate. When I got there I found Ethel and Sam. Hallock was prowling around on the terrace and Greer was with him. I could tell from what he said to Greer that he'd discovered how the two buildings backed up against each other.

"Get Kenyon and his wife and bring them over here."

The gong sounded and Ecija admitted the lawyer, a pompous little man with nose glasses and a black ribbon.

I touched Hallock's arm. "How—how is Sally Benson, Mr. Hallock?"

His pudgy mouth became firm. "We're still holding her, Donald. She was the only one with your uncle when he died. She had sufficient motive to kill him. Revenge. A plea of temporary insanity due to anger may help her, but not much." He jabbed his finger against my chest.

"And while I'm on the subject, Donald, let me give you some advice. Don't ever try to be a knight in shining armor. You don't know how close you came yesterday to being a sacrifice on the altar of chivalry."

"But you don't understand," I said. "She's not guilty. She couldn't be. She—"

"That's up to the jury, Donald. Now, if your uncle left you any money, take it and go back to Nebraska."

The lawyer unfolded a sheaf of papers and started reading. I wondered why he couldn't let all this wait until Uncle Henry'd had a decent burial. It just didn't seem right for us to be clawing at his estate like a couple of chicken hawks so soon after his death.

Greer walked in behind Albert and Gloria Kenyon. The woman was a little pale and she perched herself on a chair at the rear of the room. Kenyon stood behind her with his hands resting on her shoulders. His face wore a hard, sardonic look of confidence. He was wearing that tan outfit again.

I didn't hear much of what the lawyer said until he came to the end of the will. The estate was divided between Ethel and me except for ten thousand dollars which went to Ecija.

We all looked at the Filipino and I expected to see him smiling. But he wasn't. His face had a sickly green pallor on it and he was breathing hard.

"Ecija!" I exclaimed. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

He stumbled forward and got hold of the table top. He was staring through eyes like blank dirty windows. He clawed around the table, staggered two paces, and then clutched at his chest. I have never

seen a face express such agony. His lips twisted and his complexion turned blue, then deep purple, and finally an ashen gray. He looked like a man choking, a man drowning, strangling.

He tried to say something, but only a bubble of saliva formed against his mouth. And then suddenly he collapsed like a deck of cards. He hit the carpet on his face and lay kicking. Then he turned over and his knees were jackknifed against his stomach.

I STARED at him, unable to move, fascinated as a bird is fascinated by a snake. Hallock was on the phone. "Get a doctor up here," he cracked. "Fast, or we'll have a corpse on our hands."

I felt helpless. There was nothing any of us could do. We had to stand there and just watch him. His breath came in great gasps and the intervals between them grew longer. His mouth was open and twitching at the juncture of his jaws and his face went blue and red and purple again. He sucked in one great rasping breath and it seemed to get stuck in his chest with a rattle. Then he kicked and lay very still. His eyes were staring up toward the ceiling.

Hallock grabbed Mrs. Kenyon's purse and took out the small hand mirror. He stooped and held it against Ecija's mouth. He felt Ecija's wrist, trying to get the pulse. He laid his ear against Ecija's breast. When he straightened his face was grim and the lion's jowls didn't seem loose but muscle hard.

"The Filipino's dead!" he said.

Mrs. Kenyon was on her feet and her mouth was a thin crimson slash across her face. She moved her lips and then the words came out in a thin, shaken whisper:

"That's just what happened to Henry. He—he did the same thing."

"Keep still!" Kenyon growled. He pressed her back into the chair.

It struck me then. Like a great flash of lightning. Crystal clear. And for a second I was stricken numb with

the impact and I said very softly:

"I got it! I got it!"

I could feel all eyes turn and fasten on me. Hallock moved beside me.

"What is it, Donald?" he asked gently. "What have you got?"

I felt weak. The blood seemed to be drained from my veins and the marrow scooped out of my bones. I plumped down on the chair and I looked at Mrs. Kenyon and said:

"Uncle Henry was getting fat. You've eaten with him. Did he use saccharin instead of sugar?"

She nodded. "Yes, always."

I turned to Hallock. "Are there some poisons that affect the eyes, disturb vision?"

"Several. Thallium, digitalis—possibly others."

"Then that's it," I said. "Uncle Henry wasn't killed by a blow from the poker. He fell against it. His heart had been weakened by digitalis until he had a heart attack; his eyes had been weakened too. I saw he was wearing heavy glasses. The poison was in the saccharin. And the same thing happened to Ecija. He took saccharin tablets to imitate Uncle Henry."

The whole picture was crowding in on me, everything in its place.

"YOU see," I said, "Mrs. Kenyon was here with him and he had an attack. She got frightened and ran away. But he got over it enough to open the door when Sally Benson arrived. And while she was here he had his second attack over near the fireplace. A post mortem of his stomach, and of Ecija's, will show the poison. Sally Benson was telling the truth. He died while she was in the kitchen, falling and striking his head a vicious blow against the poker."

"Who did it, Donald?" Hallock asked.

I looked down at the floor. I felt pretty funny about the whole thing.

I said: "A man who was afraid Uncle Henry would marry Mrs. Kenyon and that would be the end of his chance ever to inherit any money. A

man who worked in a chemical factory and who knew how to load the tablets with poison. A man who had the opportunity to visit Uncle Henry and put the tablets in the kitchen where Ecija could serve them." I looked at Ethel and felt pretty sorry for her. Then I pointed at her husband. "Sam Fisher is that man."

Sam's head jerked as if it were snapping back from a blow. His breath came out through pinched nostrils like live steam. He jumped up and his eyes were like glowing coals. Greer had taken his arm and he almost yanked Greer across the room.

"You damn liar!" he snarled. "What are you trying to do? Pin this murder on me?"

In a way I felt a little sorry for him, though I shouldn't have after what he'd tried to do to me. I said to Hallock:

"Last night he tried to kill me and that would have made Ethel the sole heir. I awakened just in time and routed him. But he probably slipped and fell down the stairs, so he came back and used that as an excuse to lay suspicion on Kenyon, and maybe to learn if I'd recognized him. I guess

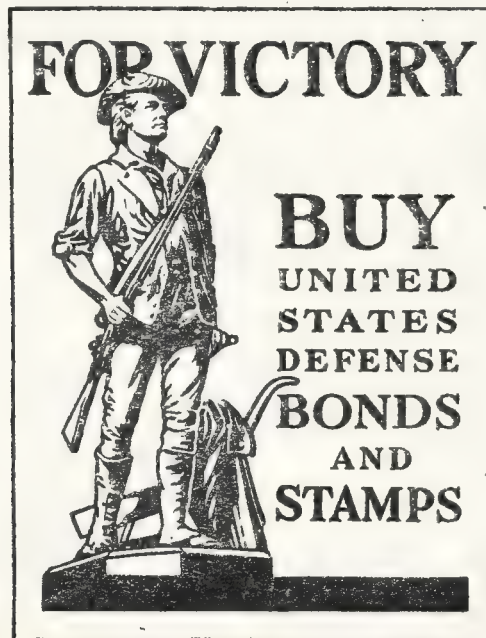
if I had he would've finished me off right then. Or maybe he was looking for a chance to recover the knife, because it probably bears his fingerprints. Why don't you take a look?"

Sam broke loose from Greer. He charged head on, frothing at the mouth actually. I didn't see Hallock take his gun out. But it was in his hand, because he let Sam have the barrel right between the eyes and Sam went down like a ton of bricks.

Poor Ethel! It must have hit her hard. She didn't even make a sound. She just folded up and passed out.

It was in all the papers that night. My picture too. I remember I waited outside for Sally when they let her go. I remember I dropped into step beside her and we walked three blocks without speaking. And maybe we'd still be walking if she hadn't taken the initiative. She stopped me and swung me around. Her eyes were dim and she was laughing, and then all of a sudden I wasn't basnful any more.

Sally likes Nebraska and she likes being a farmer's wife too. We have three hundred acres of the yellowest corn you ever saw and a big white house and four stables and six kids.



*A couple of small-time crooks rob a couple of big-time professionals—
only to learn some new tricks in . . .*

Larceny's Handbook

By Vincent Hartnett

"GOOD NIGHT, Miss Carter," said the gray-haired door-man. "Good night, Mr. Foster." Darkness beat into the foyer as he held the stage door open.

Fred Foster and Kay Carter stepped out of the Schiller Theater and into the night. They halted by the side of the building as Fred lit a cigarette. Behind them, a multicolored poster announced the Schiller's current smash hit:

MURDER WITH MIRTH

With Fred Foster and
Kay Carter
Magic, Comedy and
Murder!

"The Season's
Laughingest Thriller"
—Stuart, *Daily Herald*

Blond, lovely Kay Carter drew her evening wrap snugly about her shoulders, grasped Fred's arm tightly. Their footsteps sent hollow echoes bowling down the narrow side street. Somewhere, a clock sounded half-past twelve.

Fred fumbled in his pocket for his car keys as they halted beside an expensive limousine. He fitted a key to the lock.

"Okay, Mister, we'll take over now!"

The voice was low, menacing. Out of the gloom of an alleyway stepped two men, dark hats pulled low over their eyes, right hands buried suggestively in overcoat pockets. One was a big fellow, with hulking shoulders. The

other was small and shifty like a rat.

"Runt!"

"Yes, Al?" The little guy's voice was cringing, fearful.

"Frisk them! Look out the guy ain't got a gat. These rich actors got that bad habit!"

The Runt edged up to Fred, as the big guy, Al, kept his hidden automatic trained on him. He ran expert fingers over his person, took Fred's wallet, watch and jeweled cigarette case.

Then he grabbed Kay's evening bag.

All Fred could do was to smile encouragingly at Kay, wait for a chance to get the jump on Al. But the big man read his thoughts.

"No funny stuff, guy!" he growled. "If you start anything, your girl friend gets the first slug!"

He rummaged in an overcoat pocket, pulled out several pieces of rope and some twisted handkerchiefs.

"Okay, Runt," he ordered.

THE Runt stuck the end of his automatic into Fred's back. "Inside, guy!" Fred scrambled into the back seat. There the Runt tied him hand and foot, blindfolded him, gagged him with brutal thoroughness. Then he did the same to Kay. Al climbed into the driver's seat, started the protesting motor. The Runt shoved their victims onto the floor of the car, kick-



ing Foster soundly as he did so.

How many miles they drove, Fred had no way of knowing. He did realize that Al was deliberately trying to throw him off the track by taking many extra turns. Towards the end of their ride the roads were full of bumps. Fred managed to wriggle his shoulder behind Kay's soft hair, protecting her head from most of the jolts.

Finally, the car turned into a gravelled driveway. The Runt slit the ropes from their ankles as the car stopped, forced Fred and Kay to stagger out of the car. Al cursed as he fitted a key into a stiff lock. Musty air swept out at them as the heavy door creaked open.

"Runt, pull those curtains tight before you snap on the light," Al ordered. His voice echoed hollowly from the high paneled ceiling. The Runt's heavy breathing could be heard as he felt his way inside. Fred managed to grasp Kay's soft hand with his own bound one, seeming to signal by his clasp, "Don't worry, honey. Everything'll work out all right."

Even through the blindfold Fred could see a blaze of light as the Runt at last snapped on a switch by the door. Al herded him and Kay into a room opening off the hall, and there he removed their gags and blindfolds. But he left their hands bound.

"Nice to be here at last." Fred smiled encouragingly to Kay. Her lovely face was pale and smudged with dirt. Her hair was tousled. She smiled back.

Al grinned evilly at them. "Glad you like our little place—you may be here quite a while! Just make yourselves at home."

"Thanks," said Fred. "That won't be hard to do." He glanced around the old-fashioned parlor, sighed reflectively, "Poor Charlie!"

Al glared at him. "Whaddya mean, 'poor Charlie'?"

Fred appeared astonished. "Didn't you know that this was poor Charlie Grimm's place?" He turned to Kay.

"Why, you remember him, don't you, Kay dear? He had us here for a week-end once."

Kay blinked, caught her breath sharply. "Why, of course, Fred! It's poor Charlie Grimm's house!"

Fear grew in the Runt's shifty eyes. "Gee, Al, they know this dump! That's bad for us."

Al tried to seem unconcerned. "Well, so you know the guy who owns this joint, huh?"

"Who owned," Fred corrected gently. "Yes, I knew poor Charlie Grimm well, until he—until he—"

"Until he what?" demanded Al angrily.

FRED sighed loudly. The Runt was staring at him like a hypnotized bird. "Until one winter's night he took a steak knife and slit the throat of the old maiden aunt with whom he lived, and then apparently slashed his own from ear to ear." Fred's voice dropped. "The servants found them both the next morning, lying in that fireplace—" Fred nodded to the stone fireplace—"in a pool of clotted blood."

The Runt's teeth were chattering like dice in a box. "So that's why this joint's empty, huh?"

"Right," admitted Fred. "No one will stay here more than one night. Even the neighbors claim they can hear screams every night at two and hear the sounds of footsteps in the house." Fred's eyes searched the expressions on the gangsters' faces. "Yes, they say they can hear poor Charlie Grimm screaming and running around the house at two o'clock each night, while Charlie's Haunt chases him with a bloody steak knife!"

"Charlie's Haunt?" The big fellow's voice shook in spite of himself. He stole a look at his watch. Ten of two.

Fred laughed loudly. The echo ran around the room eerily. "Yes, that's what the people around here call the ghost of the old lady—Charlie's Haunt! Some of them even claim they've seen her walking the front hall there, all streaming with blood from

her open throat, and calling to Charlie."

The little guy's face was twitching. "Hey, Al, whaddyasay we move on to another joint? I got no use for them haunts!"

Al spat on the floor. "Here we are, and here we stay!" He strode over to the great oaken door of the room, forced it shut, turned the protesting key in the stiff lock. His voice grew stronger. "I'd like to see Charlie Grimm get in here now—or Charlie's Haunt either!"

He scowled at Kay and Fred. "Sit!"

They sat down awkwardly on horse-hair-covered chairs next to a huge mahogany table. Fred winked meaningfully at Kay. And she nodded almost imperceptibly to him.

"Runt," barked Al noisily, "put their stuff on the table."

The Runt dug Fred's wallet, cigarette case and watch out of his overcoat pocket, tossed them on the table. Then he added Kay's purse to the little heap. While she glared at him he unscrewed the pearl earrings she wore, took her wrist watch, brooch and dinner ring.

Al looked complacently at the loot. "At least eight thousand dollars," he estimated. He smirked at Fred. "And a nice check from you will make it fifteen." He grinned crookedly at Kay. "Unless, of course, you'd like to see your lady friend suffer."

"No," said Fred, "I wouldn't." He looked evenly into the big fellow's piggyish eyes. "Have you a cigarette?"

AL SCOWLED. His eyes dropped before Fred's level gaze. He grunted, drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stuck one between Fred's lips. Fred drew a deep drag on the cigarette. Then he blew out the gray smoke sharply. Kay's eyes were fastened sharply on his face.

Suddenly, the Runt shot out of his chair. "Hell! What's that, Al?" His hand tightened on the automatic.

Al had heard it too. The room became deathly silent, except for the

hoarse whisper of heavy breathing.

Then, seemingly from the ceiling overhead, came a scraping noise. Shuff, shuff, shuff.

Little beads of perspiration stood out on the Runt's forehead. "It's someone walkin', Al." His voice cracked. "It's that old dame with the slit throat!"

"Shut up, you rat!" Al tensed, gun in hand, staring at the ceiling.

Shuff, shuff, shuff. Like an old lady shuffling across a wooden floor. The watch on the table ticked loudly. It was two o'clock.

"Ooo-ooh," quavered an old lady's voice. "Why did you do it, Charlie? Charlie, why did you do it?"

"Auntie, Auntie, forgive me!" a young man pleaded. His voice broke into a scream of terror. "Don't point that knife at me, Auntie! Let me rest!"

"You didn't let me rest, Charlie," the eerie voice complained. "And now I must cut your pretty throat before you can rest." The old lady chuckled overhead.

The Runt was hanging onto the table. His face seemed almost green. "Al, let's get out—quick—before that old witch comes down here!"

The automatic was trembling in Al's big paw. "Let her come," he whispered. "I'll fix her!"

"No," said Fred softly, "you know you won't fix her, Al. You know you can't shoot a ghost—they have no body to get hurt."

Fred looked at the Runt. "She never liked strangers in her house!" The Runt kept staring at the ceiling. Fred slid softly out of his chair. Kay caught his nod, rose without a sound. She inched carefully toward the door. The smoke from Fred's cigarette rose in a thin spiral, like a thin blue snake. He let the butt fall to the floor.

"Charlie, here I come!" the old voice screamed overhead. There was a thunder of running footsteps. Al and the Runt stood frozen with terror. A man screamed in awful agony as a heavy

blow fell. An old woman's voice rose in unholy triumph.

"There, Charlie dear, now you can rest—without your pretty heart!" The old hag cackled in merriment. "And now for those strange gentlemen in my parlor, Charlie!"

Shuff, shuff, shuff went the footsteps. "Just a little minute, gentlemen!" pleaded the old voice.

And then the lights went out.

"Al, Al!" the Runt shrieked. He made gurgling noises. There was a thumping at the great oaken door. And then the weird laughter of Charlie's Haunt echoed hollowly in the room.

"Go 'way, you old witch!" Al called in terror.

A CHAIR went crashing to the floor. There was the sound of a heavy blow. A man groaned in pain. And the room was still.

"All right, Kay," Fred's voice broke the silence. "You can put the lights on again."

The light from the antique chandelier shone on a strange sight.

On the floor, crumpled up like a sack, was the Runt. Near him, hunched over the table, holding his head and groaning in pain, was Al. And Fred stood there, automatic trained on the thugs, breathing quickly, his face flushed with triumph. He and Kay smiled at each other, as lovers smile. She tried to smooth back her golden hair.

"Great work on the screams, Kay," said Fred. "You were a marvelous 'Haunt'—never better on the stage!"

"Thank you," Kay made an old-fashioned curtsy. "You weren't half bad yourself—Charlie! And your footwork was really impressive!"

Al groaned, blinked pain-soaked eye-

lids. "That old witch—she hit me!"

Fred rubbed his knuckles reflectively. "Yes," he said sorrowfully, "I'm afraid I did."

Slow comprehension began to dawn in Al's little eyes. He looked hard at Kay and Fred standing there. "Hell, I might have known it! A frameup, huh?"

Fred grinned cheerfully. "Yes, my big friend, a frameup proper." He and Kay laughed at Al's befuddlement.

"No, of course you don't see how we did it," Kay said. "Our hands were tied, weren't they? And the footsteps and voices did seem to come from overhead, didn't they? And you did get a bang-up wallop on the jaw!"

Fred carefully slid a little card out of his wallet on the table. He held it gingerly before Al's face, keeping the gun pointed at the big fellow.

"You and the Runt were smart, Al," he said gently, "but you weren't smart enough. You didn't trouble to find out the exact business of your prospective victims!"

"Yeah?" said Al.

"Yeah!" Kay laughed.

Al peered at the words on the card:

FRED F. FOSTER

King of Comedy and Conjuring
Sleight-of-Hand, Escapes, Illusions
The Man with a Hundred Voices

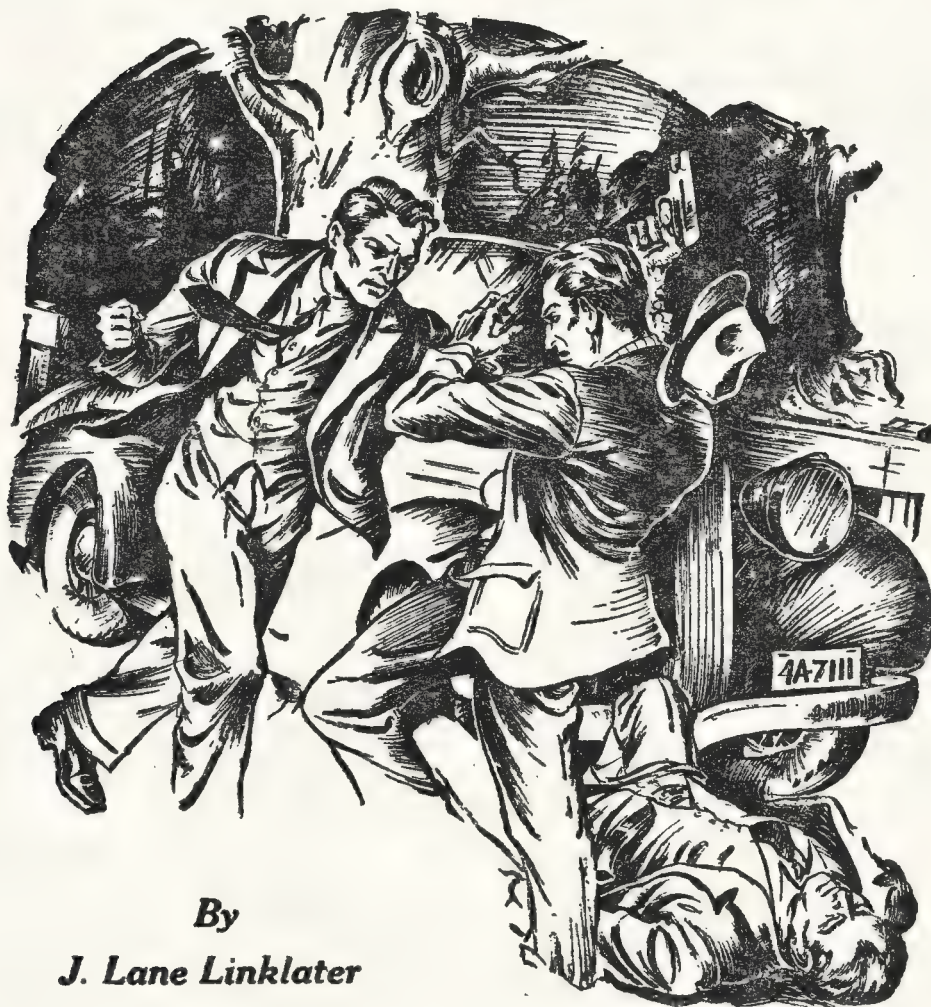
Fred handed the gun to Kay, picked up the ropes the thugs had used to tie them. He drew a tight noose around the big guy's wrists. "Maybe you'll get to see our show sometime, Al," he laughed.

From the ceiling overhead, "Charlie's Haunt" cackled in blood-curdling merriment. Fred looked at Kay admiringly. Her lips never moved as she "threw her voice."

"Yes, Al," mocked Charlie's Haunt, "if we ever play San Quentin!"



Homicide Landmark



By
J. Lane Linklater

Despite the damning evidence, Buck Mead couldn't believe his boyhood pal committed that murder. And Mead either had to accept H. Q.'s findings or give up his job to get the real lowdown on that suicide rendezvous.

BUCK MEAD parked his car under an umbrella tree some distance from Pedro's shack. It was San Leona's one police car and anyone watching would have recognized it. It was late, past eleven

o'clock, and most of San Leona's Mexican town was drowsing.

Buck's tall large-shouldered form moved quietly through the warmth of the Southern California night. He didn't like this assignment, but he

had to go through with it. The yard he came to had a high rough hedge around it. Buck pushed open the flimsy gate and slipped into the dark yard; a yard that had nothing growing in it, but was swept clean, Mexican fashion. The rough board shack in the far corner was like a smudge in the shadows. A giant cactus half concealed the door. Buck knocked sharply.

The door opened. The black eyes of a small aging Mexican blinked up at Buck anxiously.

"I've come for Freddie Garcia," Buck said.

"*Freddie no es a qui,*" said the Mexican rapidly.

"Don't give me that, Pedro," said Buck. "I know Freddie came here tonight because I just checked up at Gonzalez' store and found out you bought some stuff, extra, this evening. If Freddie won't come out, I'll have to come in after him!"

The old Mexican protested excitedly. Buck shrugged and started to push past him. A noise outside, along the side of the shack, halted him. He turned rapidly and ran. He was just in time to see a figure slip from a window to the ground.

Buck had his revolver out. "Sorry, Freddie," he said. "I've got you covered."

The young Mexican turned and faced him. Freddie Garcia looked older now, and less hopeful, than when, just a few years ago, he and Buck had gone through high school together. Freddie had been something of a school hero, then, especially good at sports. The handsome Mexican lad had been popular. But after graduation there hadn't been much open for Freddie, except to sink back into the rut of his fellows. Just an orange-picker—and a shack-dweller.

"You'd do this to me, Buck!" Freddie said bitterly.

"I've got to, Freddie. Orders!"

A sudden stinging blow snapped down on Buck's wrist. His gun dropped from his numbed fingers. Old

Pedro had dealt the blow with a short club. Buck turned to grapple with him, but he vanished into the darkness. Buck swung back toward Freddie.

Now there was a gun in Freddie's hand. "I'm sorry, Buck," Freddie said softly. "But I've got to go. I didn't kill Dick Hooper, but I know nobody will believe me. You stay here—"

"Freddie," said Buck, "I'm taking you!"

Freddie was six paces away. The automatic in his hand was aimed straight at Buck's stomach.

Freddie said: "I'll shoot! You'll die, Buck! You'll die!"

"I've got to take you, Freddie!"

Buck moved toward Freddie, toward the gun, slowly, but not looking at the gun. Freddie bent forward, the gun pointing rigid. Unhurried, Buck's steps destroyed the distance; he made no effort to reach out, and Freddie could have emptied his gun into him.

With a sigh, Freddie hurled the gun far into the shadows of the yard. "Okay, Buck," he said. "You knew I couldn't do it."

CHIEF BEDFORD was waiting at the San Leona jail. With him was Captain Reccord of the sheriff's office, who had come out from Los Angeles to see about the murder of Dick Hooper. Captain Reccord was to take Freddie Garcia in to the city in a day or two—and that would be the last San Leona would see of Freddie.

Freddie was put in a cell.

Chief Bedford, a man of huge girth and pudgy face, was pleased; he saw glory for himself in this arrest. Captain Reccord, his lank form sprawled lazily in the chief's chair, was mildly happy. This was routine to him and he was glad to get through with it so easily.

"You did all right," Bedford told Buck generously. "Tomorrow we'll complete the case against Freddie."

"I'd like a free hand on that, chief," Buck said.

Chief Bedford stared. "What do

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you mean, a free hand?" he snapped. "This thing is practically cleaned up!" He poked the soggy end of his cigar at a steel instrument on his desk. "That thing there is enough to convict Freddie—it's *his* clippers. He won't deny that."

Buck nodded. He knew the case, as it stood, was certainly strong enough to convict Freddie. Dick Hooper, the murdered lad, had been much the same age as Buck and Freddie. They had all gone to school together. But Dick's father was wealthy, had a large orange grove. For Dick, the problem of making a living had never existed.

It was no secret, either, that even in school days Dick had never tired of making things tough for Freddie. Envy had done that. Dick's big ambition had been to shine as a track star, but at every test Freddie had beaten him. In recent times, too, Dick had never missed an opportunity to taunt and harass Freddie.

As one of a gang of Mexican orange-pickers, Freddie had often worked in the Hooper grove. Only yesterday he had been there. Freddie had been up on a ladder, a picking bag slung over his shoulder, when Dick Hooper came along. Dick had shouted up at him, remarks reflecting on a Mexican girl with whom Freddie kept company.

That had been too much for Freddie. He had sprung from the ladder and attacked Dick savagely. They had been separated, however, without injury to either. That night, Dick had spent the evening around town. He had not returned home. The next morning his body was found under a huge pepper-berry tree in the middle of his father's grove. His face was bruised, and there were three ugly wounds in his neck.

BUCK MEAD gazed steadily at Chief Bedford. He said with conviction: "I don't believe Freddie Garcia is guilty of killing Dick Hooper!"

The chief flushed. "Nonsense! Any-

how, it ain't for you to believe one way or the other."

"Yes, sir," conceded Buck. "But it's too bad—"

"Let's check this over," cut in Captain Reccord. "What have we got against the Mexican fellow? First, we know there was bad blood between them, and that's motive enough. Second, Freddie won't tell where he was that night, so he has no alibi. Third, there are footprints that check with Freddie's shoes just inside the grove fence at the south end—prints that show Freddie going in and coming out.

"Freddie wouldn't have made those prints while he was working in the grove because he'd have no occasion to go near that fence. And fourth, there are those orange clippers, which are admitted to be Freddie's, which were bloody, which were found near the body and were certainly used to stick the Hooper lad in the neck."

"Right!" Chief Bedford said triumphantly. "And that makes it dead sure!"

"Those clippers," put in Buck, "are not orange clippers. They're lemon clippers."

Captain Reccord frowned. "Is there a difference?"

Buck said: "Yes, sir. You have to be careful, picking oranges, but you have to be *more* careful picking lemons. Oranges and lemons are both clipped off the stems, not yanked off, but orange clippers are stubby-bladed, while the lemon clippers have long pointed blades, five or six inches long, like those there."

"So much the worse for Freddie," growled Chief Bedford. "In the first place, you couldn't stab anyone very well with a pair of orange clippers, but you could do it easy with lemon clippers. The blades are long and sharp-pointed, and they come together like a dagger when the handle is fastened."

"Yes," agreed Captain Reccord. "So much the worse for Freddie!"

"I still don't like it," argued Buck, "and I'd like to—"

"You'll do as I say," shouted Bedford.

Buck was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "All right, sir. So I resign!"

Chief Bedford's cheeks blew out. "What?"

"I'm resigning," said Buck. "Right now!"

Buck got up late the next morning. It was ten o'clock before he sat down to breakfast in the Citrus Café. By that time, he discovered, everyone in San Leona had learned that he was no longer a policeman, and everyone knew why. Most people were sympathetic, but thought he was a fool. There didn't seem to be any doubt at all that Freddie Garcia had killed Dick Hooper. Nobody blamed him much, but there wasn't any use doing anything about it.

Mary Heath prepared Buck's usual dish of ham and scrambled eggs. Mary had a pleasantly sturdy little figure, and a pleasantly brown eye.

She said: "Don't look so down, Buck."

Buck grinned. "You know I'm not a copper any more?"

"Of course."

"And I'll bet you're all through with a guy that deliberately throws away his job?"

"You know better than that, honey. I feel pretty bad about the whole thing. We all went to school together—you and Freddie and Dick and me." Mary smiled. "Of course I was a couple of years behind you, but I was old enough to keep an eye on you."

"You're swell," Buck said. "But this looks like we'll have to postpone everything."

"I guess I can take it."

"What do you think of this mess?" Buck asked anxiously.

Mary hesitated. She leaned across the counter, spoke low: "If Freddie did it, I couldn't blame him."

"But do you believe he did it?"

"It does look bad for him." Mary dropped her voice a little lower. "There's something I haven't mentioned to anyone, honey—I didn't want to make it any tougher for Freddie."

Buck put more butter on the toast. "You mean you know something?"

"I was here until midnight, the night before last. A few minutes before I closed up, Dick came in for a cup of coffee. He left just before I locked the door. Through the window I saw him get in his car and drive south. A moment later I saw Freddie come out of the post office doorway across the street and hurry off in the same direction."

"So you think Freddie was following Dick?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Thanks for not mentioning it to anyone else."

Mary said: "Freddie won't tell where he was that night?"

"Not a word."

"Then I—don't see what you can do about it, honey."

Buck shoved his plate back and got up. "Neither do I," he said.

THEN Buck walked up the street to the Citrus Pool Parlor & Bar, and sought the proprietor. Stokely Heaton, who owned the place, was a short man with narrow shoulders and a heavy-hanging paunch.

"Yes," he told Buck, "Dick was in here awhile, evening before last. Left here about eleven-thirty, I guess."

"Who'd he talk to while he was here?"

Heaton was evasive. "I wouldn't know about that. I was tending to business. He was squatting there at the bar mostly, the way I remember it. Joe Cowper was tending bar."

Apparently Heaton didn't want to talk. Buck walked over to the bar. The man behind the bar was big and rangy, like Buck himself. Joe Cowper had spent a couple of years in the ring, but had fizzled out; he had the build but not the heart.

"Hello, Joe," Buck said pleasantly. "Thought maybe you could tell me about the night before last. I'd like to know if Dick was talking to anyone special."

Joe pushed an unkempt lock of hair out of his squinty eyes and grinned. "Off your beat, ain't you, Buck? I hear you ain't a copper any more."

"I'd like to know anyway."

Joe read something implacable in Buck's eyes. "Why, sure, Buck. Didn't mean no offense. Let's see now. Seems to me Dick was talking mostly with Will Dobbs."

Buck nodded. Will Dobbs was the foreman on the Hooper orange grove.

"Will Dobbs, eh? What were they talking about?"

Joe shook his head. "I was pretty busy, Buck."

So Joe had nothing to say! Buck smiled faintly, and walked out. No doubt Joe was getting a big kick out of all this, especially because Buck was through as a policeman. It might help Joe with Mary. Joe clung tenaciously to the idea that he could induce Mary to desert Buck for him.

Buck got in his car and drove south. The Hooper grove was out that way, just a couple of miles. It was one of the finest groves anywhere around. Dick's father, Sam Hooper, was a shrewd business man; and a widower.

Buck drove in the main driveway, parked by the side of the house. He wandered along the edge of the grove so that he could look far down the rows, and presently he saw a gang of pickers at work some distance away.

He strode toward them.

A man watching the pickers turned and approached him. He said beligerently: "What are you looking for, Buck?"

Buck eyed Sam Hooper's foreman keenly. Dobbs was a burly man, big-jawed.

"They tell me," Buck said, "Dick

spent a good deal of time the night before last talking to you, in Heaton's place."

"Maybe he did," Dobbs glared morosely. "You got no right questioning anybody. And I don't think Sam Hooper would want you on the place here."

"Can't do any harm, just talking," Buck said mildly. "I was wondering if Dick had anything special to say that night."

Dobbs' glowering face suddenly took on a sardonic grin. "Well," he said, "there was nothing special. Dick and I were talking about the grove, mostly."

Buck gazed past Dobbs at the big tree in the center of the grove. It was a beautiful pepper-berry tree, the only one in the grove, and it towered high above the forest of orange trees around it. It had been there when the grove was planted and had been permitted to remain as a landmark.

It was beneath that tree that Dick Hooper's body had been found.

Buck said abruptly: "Did Dick say anything that might have a bearing on the murder?"

Dobbs spread his hands. "Nothing. We were just talking about the grove—orange prices—things like that."

Buck stared at Dobbs reflectively. Dick wasn't the kind to sit around talking about oranges all evening. Oranges meant nothing to him beyond the fact that they brought his father in plenty of money. So, undoubtedly, Dobbs was lying.

A voice behind Buck said sharply: "What are you doing here?"

Buck faced Sam Hooper who stood there, tall and erect. His grim, thin-featured face was ugly with bitterness.

"Well, I'm sorry about Dick, Mr. Hooper," Buck said. "But I think a mistake is being made—"

"There's no mistake," snapped Hooper. "That Garcia fellow is guilty as hell. And since you're fool enough to take up with him, I don't want

you around. Get off my place—and stay off!”

Buck said: “It’s your place, sir.”

He plodded back to his car.

IT WAS noon when Buck got back to town. He stood just outside the bank and watched the entrance to the Citrus Café. Presently he saw Chief Bedford and Captain Reccord go in for their noon meal.

Buck wanted to talk to Freddie Garcia again, and he knew that he wouldn’t have much chance if Bedford and Reccord were at the jail. With them away it was easy. The one man on duty was an old pal and made no objection.

But Freddie didn’t want to talk. He said: “It’s no use, Buck. You know how it is with a guy like me. Tomorrow that guy from the sheriff’s office will take me away and that’ll be the finish. I’ve got no dough, no drag. So no chance!”

“Listen, Freddie,” Buck argued. “I’m your pal. I’m out of a job because I’m for you. That ought to be enough.”

Freddie wagged his head. “I wish you hadn’t done it, Buck. I—I can’t talk.”

Buck said: “The reason you won’t talk is that you think anything you say would make things worse instead of better. And I can see why. I know that the night before last you were tailing Dick around town. It looks to me like you caught up with him in the grove. Dick’s face was bruised, so my guess is that you beat hell out of him and left him lying there.”

Freddie’s eyes narrowed. He was silent a moment, then he said: “Okay, Buck. It will only make things worse, but I’ll tell you. I intended to give Dick a beating. I’d been taking his dirt for years. The day before yesterday, there in the grove, when he made remarks about that girl I go with, I made up my mind. But I knew I had to get him alone, otherwise others would interfere.

“So, as you say, I followed him around. It was in the pool hall that I heard him say that he would be in the grove, under that pepper-berry tree, at one o’clock, so I—”

“Who did he say it to?”

“Stokey Heaton himself. Dick was talking to him near the door. They didn’t see me, and they were talking in whispers.”

“You didn’t hear what else they were talking about?”

“No, I slipped out. When Dick started for home, I followed him. I was waiting for him in the grove when he showed up at that tree. I knocked him out, and then left.”

“Did you examine him before you left?”

“Yes. He was all right. Only stunned.”

“You saw no one else?”

“No one.”

“Well, Dick was jabbed three times in the neck with that pair of clippers. Your clippers.”

Freddie shrugged. “I had the clippers in my hip pocket. I guess they just slipped out in the struggle. I didn’t notice. I went on home, and the next morning I heard about Dick being found dead. So I went into hiding—guilty knowledge I guess you’d call it. Anyhow, I knew I was slated for trouble.” Freddie’s fingers clutched the bars. “See what I mean? Talking would only get me in worse. No one would believe I didn’t stab Dick.”

“No one would believe it,” agreed Buck. “But I had to know how it happened. You heard nothing at the pool hall that would indicate *why* Dick intended to show up at that tree at one o’clock, or *who* he expected to meet there?”

“I heard nothing like that.”

“That makes it tough. Well, see you later, Freddie!”

Freddie forced a grin. “Thanks, Buck! But you won’t be seeing me again. They’ll be taking me away from here in the morning!”

“Not if I know it,” said Buck.

BUCK drove back out to Sam Hooper's property. He had been in the Hooper house a good many times and knew its arrangements. At this time Hooper himself should be out in the grove. There'd be no one in the house, except the housekeeper, and she'd be in the kitchen, clearing away the lunch.

Quietly, Buck let himself in the front door. To the right of the hallway inside was a living room. Buck slipped in there. The room was choked with the solid furniture of a long-past period. At one end of the room, old-fashioned portieres draped over another doorway.

Buck pushed aside the portieres. Here was a very small room, a barely furnished office, with a rolled-top desk and a couple of old swivel chairs. Some ancient letter files lined one wall. Just beyond, in the east wall, was a large outside window.

Buck crossed to the window, opened it and looked out. A few feet below was a gravel walk.

Turning away from the window, Buck noticed a handkerchief on the floor, near the desk. He picked it up. It was just a clean white handkerchief. Buck regarded it thoughtfully, then thrust it into his pocket.

Suddenly, there was a quiet movement beyond the portieres. Old Sam Hooper pushed through the drapes. He had a gun in his hand. His eyes blazed angrily.

"You're trespassing, Buck," Hooper said. "I could shoot you down as you stand and be within my rights."

"But you're talking foolish," said Buck. "My only purpose is to find out who killed your son."

"That's found out already."

"You may think so, but I don't. Now, I've been thinking about the motive for the murder."

Sam Hooper snorted. "Motive! Only one person had any motive, and that was Garcia. Revenge!"

"It looks that way," conceded Buck. "But a killer might have another motive. Money!"

"Money? You're crazy! Dick had very little money."

"No. But *you* had plenty, Mr. Hooper!"

Hooper stared curiously. It was no secret that Sam Hooper had plenty of money. It was even known to a few local people—including the police—that he had an old-timer's distrust of banks and kept a good deal of ready cash on his own premises.

"*My* money!" he muttered. "But how—"

He stopped suddenly and sidled around the room toward the filing cases. He shouldered the case out of the way and revealed a wall safe. Still keeping an eye on Buck as much as possible, he twirled the dial, opened the safe.

He reached in and brought out a stack of currency.

Expertly, he counted the money.

"Good Lord," he said thickly, "it's short! Short about three thousand dollars!"

"I had a hunch that's what you'd find," Buck said. "Now, if you can figure out who robbed—"

"But no one knew the combination of the safe! I'm the only one who knew—and I carried it in my head, never wrote it down!"

"Dick didn't know?"

"No."

"Nor Dobbs?"

"No. No one knew, I tell you!"

"Have you had the safe opened lately?"

"Only once in three weeks. That was night before last."

Buck said slowly: "That was the night of the murder!"

THE old man's excitement was mounting. "But that couldn't have had anything to do with it! Dobbs happened to drop in. It was a little after midnight—"

"Wasn't that unusual?"

"No. I never go to bed until late and Dobbs might drop in any time. He came in to make sure about the

details of a lease I had taken on a place east of town. He was to see about getting the terms revised the next day. We sat talking it over, beyond there, in the living room. I came in here, opened the safe and got the lease out. I took it in the living room and we looked it over for a few minutes, then I brought it back and put it in the safe."

"Dobbs didn't come in this room?"
"No."

"Did you have the safe locked the few minutes you had the lease in the living room with Dobbs?"

"It was closed, but not locked. I wasn't gone more than ten minutes."

Buck indicated the window. "Maybe someone could have climbed in there—"

"Someone did climb in there," cut in Hooper savagely. "But not the night before last! *Today!*" Hooper's eyes were bright with suspicion. "I had that window closed. I come back here and find it open—and you here! You got in that window—and you probably got the money!"

Buck said: "You're talking wild, Mr. Hooper. I came in the front door. I knew you had a safe in here, but I didn't know where."

Hooper waved his gun. "That's it!" he cried. "I wondered why you quit your job to help Garcia! You two have been working together. You robbed me! I don't know just how it was worked, or why you came in here today, but it's clear you and Garcia were in cahoots—and still are!"

Buck gazed at Hooper reflectively. "Okay," he said. "If that's the way you feel about it, you'd better call the police." He smiled. "This time yesterday, I'd have answered the call myself."

The telephone was on a small stand against the west wall. Hooper moved toward it. Buck watched him; Sam Hooper was a wiry man but would be no match for Buck. Buck didn't want to hurt him.

Hooper reached for the instrument.

The movement brought him close to Buck. Buck's fingers closed on Hooper's arm and the gun clattered to the floor. Furiously, Hooper started to struggle, but Buck pushed him hard and he whirled backwards across the room.

Hooper recovered, started forward again. Buck was already easing through the window. He dropped to the walk and ran to his car. Hooper fired at him as he took the wheel, but Buck swung the car about and headed back to town.

Just short of town he stopped at a filling station and called Stoker Heaton's pool hall. Heaton himself answered.

"Just doing a little more checking," Buck said casually. "Did you close up at midnight, the night before last?"

"You know I did," grumbled Heaton. "It's the law." He paused a moment. "But I was right here, myself, with a couple of other guys, until three o'clock. Didn't leave the place. I had the door locked, so it's nobody's business what I did here after midnight."

"Sure," said Buck. "Thanks."

Heaton's story sounded all right. Buck knew well enough that Heaton often did just that. He locked his door at midnight and then settled down to a big private gambling session with two or three others. For that matter, Dick Hooper had sometimes been in on those big games.

BUCK took a revolver out of a car pocket. He left the car at the filling station, and walked, using back lots. It was certain that Sam Hooper had phoned the police, and they could hold him for illegal entry, at least.

It was a few minutes after two. Mary would be alone in her little café. By this time the lunch rush would be over. Mary's kitchen help went off duty at two, and Mary herself prepared the few orders that

came in, as well as waiting on the counter.

By way of an alley, Buck reached Mary's kitchen. Mary joined him quickly.

"I don't want anyone to know where I am," Buck explained. He told her what had happened. "So don't tell anyone I was here."

"Of course not," Mary whispered. "But what you've done so far doesn't seem to help Freddie!"

"Reading the evidence the way others do," admitted Buck, "it makes things look worse, if anything. But there are people who know things—people who won't talk because their hands are dirty."

"Who?"

"Stokey Heaton and Will Dobbs, I think."

"Would Heaton talk to Joe Cowper?"

Buck grinned at the gusto Mary put in the question. She figured that if Joe knew anything, she could get it out of him. Joe was her worst pest. He came into the café every evening for dinner and renewed his suit with Mary.

Buck said: "Heaton wouldn't tell Joe any more than he had to. But it so happens it's Joe I want you to work on."

Mary made a face. "What am I to do?"

"When Joe comes in this evening. I want you to be friendly to him." Buck's grin was embarrassed. "In fact, I want you to tell him you'll go away with him!"

Mary's face crimsoned. "Buck Mead! I could slap you!"

"Well, heck, honey," Buck said uncomfortably, "it's for a good cause. And I don't want you to really go away with him. If you did, I'd follow you and slap you both down! But I want you to tell him that. Tell him you're tired of hanging around this town and would like to go away with a man of the world—like he is! Tell him you'll meet him at the seven o'clock train tomorrow morning."

"It'll make me ill, telling him that," Mary complained.

"But you'll do it?"

"If you say so!"

"Swell!"

Buck produced the handkerchief he had picked up in Sam Hooper's office. He reached for a bottle of chili sauce and daubed some of it on the handkerchief.

"What's that for?" asked Mary.

"Just a gag," said Buck. "I don't know if it'll work or not." He shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket. "One thing more. Chief Bedford will likely be in for dinner this evening, as usual. You tell him, on the quiet, that you're sore at me for quitting my job. And tell him that you know where he can nab me!"

Mary moaned. "Oh, Lord, but you're a hard master!"

"Never mind that," said Buck. "You tell the old rascal that if he'll go out to Sam Hooper's grove tonight, he'll probably see me around. Tell him to find a good hiding place and keep an eye on that big pepperberry tree. From midnight on!"

"Honey," protested Mary, "I hate to do it!"

"But you will?"

"If you say so!"

BEFORE midnight, from across the road to the Hooper grove, Buck watched a car drive past and stop against the fence some distance beyond. Chief Bedford and Captain Reccord got out and climbed the fence. Obviously, they did not intend to disturb old Sam Hooper.

It was a warm night, but moonless; visibility poor. Buck crossed the road, vaulted the fence into the grove. This part of the grove was sixty acres, a large grove in itself; thousands of orange trees in evenly spaced rows. The lanes between the rows had been recently plowed, so that it was easy to walk noiselessly. Buck moved across the grove in the direction of the center. Presently he stopped near a tree.

In a few minutes he glimpsed two vague figures coming from the far side. Chief Bedford and Captain Reccord were moving slowly. The two stopped some distance from the pepper-berry tree, melted into the blackness beneath the branches of an orange tree.

For some time there was no movement anywhere. Buck lifted his wrist close to his eyes to consult his watch. Almost midnight. He slipped away from the tree, moving rapidly in a long circular maneuver, until he was behind Bedford and Reccord. He neared them silently.

He said: "I've got you covered, gents!"

They both swung around, and Bedford snapped: "Put that gun down, you—"

"Sorry, but I can't do that," Buck said gently. "I've got to keep you under control until this job is done."

Captain Reccord laughed. "You're a smart lad," he said. "I had a hunch this was a trap. What do we do now?"

"Just wait," said Buck. "Keep looking at the pepper-berry tree. Better be quiet, too."

They waited.

In a little while Bedford yapped hoarsely: "There's someone coming—"

"Don't talk," broke in Buck. "Just watch."

From the far side of the grove came a man, moving fast. He stopped when he came to the pepper-berry tree, hesitated, then turned at right angles and started again, more slowly.

Buck said quietly: "You two walk ahead of me, straight down this lane, so we'll be parallel with that fellow."

They started off. The man in the lane beyond, too distant for sure recognition, seemed too intent to look about. Presently he stopped again.

Buck, still behind the other two, told them: "Stop here. Don't move until I say so."

They watched. The man was down on his knees, clawing at the ground near the foot of a tree.

Bedford muttered: "Let's go get him!"

"Wait," said Buck.

The man on his knees was getting up. He was clutching something in his hands.

"I'll bet that's old man Hooper's dough!" croaked Bedford. "Let's go—"

"Wait," said Buck.

They waited—a few seconds. The man was thrusting something into his clothes. He was starting to turn away. He stopped abruptly. Two more figures emerged from the shadows, grotesquely, like a couple of ill-assorted ghosts.

Voices clashed angrily. The man who had been alone dashed at the others. There was a collision of bodies. A gun flashed and the shot echoed through the trees.

Buck said: "Okay. Let's go!"

BUCK led the charge. It was about fifty yards. When they got there one man was on the ground, moaning. One of the others was tall and big, the other bulky with fat. The tall one swung about and fired at Buck, but Buck's gun blazed first. The man bellowed, and his gun arm flapped limply.

The man on the ground was Will Dobbs, and the bulky one was Stokay Heaton. The tall man who had dropped his gun—the one they had been watching—was Joe Cowper.

Buck said: "Okay, chief. You can take over now. As you guessed, Joe has Sam Hooper's money on him. It was Joe who killed Dick Hooper."

"Well, maybe," mumbled Bedford, "but I don't get it."

Buck said: "I think you'll find out it works this way. Dick Hooper owed Stokay Heaton a big gambling debt and had to make good or Heaton would make plenty trouble for him."

Dick was afraid of his father, yet the only way he could get the money was to steal it from the old man. To do that he arranged with Dobbs to call on Sam Hooper on some pretext that would cause him to open his safe and leave it unlocked for a few minutes—long enough for Dick to get in the window and steal the money.

"For this service, no doubt, Dobbs would get a cut of the loot, without incriminating himself. Then Dick was to meet someone under the pepper-berry tree at one o'clock with the money. Who? Certainly Heaton wouldn't go there himself, because he's too cagey to let himself get involved in a crime. So he'd send someone. Who would he send? Joe, of course! He wouldn't have to tell Joe anything except to meet Dick at the tree so that Dick could hand him a package.

"So Joe went to meet Dick, but before he got there Freddie had knocked Dick out. It's quite possible Joe saw him do it. With Freddie gone, Joe went over to Dick, took the package of money, made sure of what it was, then used the clippers Freddie had dropped to finish Dick for good!"

Bedford said grudgingly: "Maybe you're right."

Buck went on: "Now that Joe had the money he had to go back to Heaton and report. He wouldn't dare take the money with him. But where would he hide it? What better place than right here in the grove? It's big, and with the ground already plowed it's unlikely it would be found accidentally. Of course, he wouldn't bury it close to Dick's body. He'd pick a spot some distance away.

"The only danger in that would be that he might not be able to find the spot himself, later. It's difficult to recall an exact spot in an orange grove, where there are thousands of trees, all much the same and all spaced out evenly. That's why I knew

that when he came for the money he would first go to the pepper-berry tree—so that from there he could count the trees to the spot where the money was buried."

"Pretty good, my boy," commended Captain Reccord. "But how did you know Joe would come for the money *tonight*?"

Buck grinned. "I worked a trick—with the help of a lady."

"A trick?"

"Yes, sir. Joe is very sweet on a certain lady. I asked her to tell Joe that she'd meet him at the train in the morning and go away with him. I knew Joe couldn't resist that bait



—and I also knew that he wouldn't go away and leave all that cash!"

CAPTAIN RECCORD turned to Bedford. "You'd better reinstate this lad at once, chief. You need intelligence in your office." He turned

to Buck again. "How about these others—Dobbs and Heaton?"

"Dobbs and Heaton," said Buck, "would be sure to suspect Joe of getting the money, in spite of what he told them, since there was no money found on Dick's body. So I knew they'd keep a close watch on Joe, and likely tail him whenever he left the job at night." Buck looked down at Dobbs, who was still sitting on the ground, nursing a wound in his side. "What about it, Dobbs?"

"I'm not talking," growled Dobbs.

"How about you, Heaton?"

Heaton shrugged. "I'm in the clear, anyway," he said. "I admit Dick owed me money. I admit he said he could get it and would have it at that tree at one o'clock. I admit I sent Joe to get it. But Joe came back and said he didn't get it—said he found Dick dead. So now I'm out the dough Dick owed me—and the hell with it."

"How about you, Joe?"

Joe Cowper's right arm was dripping blood into a furrow. An impudent grin formed on his distorted face as he said: "You think you got me, huh? But you ain't tied me into that killing! Sure, you can show I was on the spot, and you can show I got the dough. But I'm still saying I showed up *after* the kid was killed and seen the dough and helped myself. That's human nature, ain't it?"

Chief Bedford exclaimed: "By heck, maybe that's so!"

Captain Reccord frowned. "Wait a minute," he said. "Let's ask Buck about that, too."

Buck shook his head sadly. "Well, it was like this. Dick was lying on the ground. Maybe he was just coming to. You bent over him, Joe. You had Freddie's clippers. You jabbed them into his neck, hard. Once! Twice! Three times! The blood spurted up, hit you in the face! The hot blood! When the job was done, you took your handkerchief and wiped

your face." Buck reached into his pocket, flipped out a handkerchief. It looked spotted, reddish. "So with this you wiped the blood—"

"It's a lie!" yelled Joe. "You're framing me! It wasn't like that! I never wiped my face! The blood didn't spurt—"

"Thanks, Joe," cut in Buck. "You sure fell for that little act. This isn't your handkerchief. And there's no blood on it. The blood didn't spurt out of Dick's neck—it merely ran out." Buck chuckled. "But how did you know that, Joe, *unless you were there doing the job?*"

Joe waved his left fist wildly. "Okay, so I did it! But you'll never take me—"

Suddenly, he lunged, knocked Chief Bedford flat. He started to run, but Buck had slipped around him and cracked the side of his jaw briskly. Joe Cowper went down hard.

Captain Reccord said: "That was swell. We can take care of things now. That Mexican boy seems like a nice lad—be glad to turn him loose." He put a hand on Buck's shoulder. "There'll be a bigger job for you some day—"

"Buck! Buck!" It was Mary's voice, calling from the trees beyond. "Where are you, Buck?"

"Here!" called Buck.

She came running. "I heard shots," she cried. "I was afraid—you might be hurt!"

"What are you doing around here anyway?" Buck chided her.

"Well, darn it," said Mary, "I came out to see what was going on. I figure I'm entitled to a good sound man."

Buck said: "Gents, I'd better take this lady home."

They strolled away together.

"Orange trees are nice, aren't they?" Buck said.

"Especially the blossoms," said Mary.

Inspector Donovan couldn't understand why the killer wanted to pin the rap on himself—until he got the lowdown on a . . .

Design for a Rub-Out

By
George Beltz



THE dame was gorgeous. But there was something more than beauty in the lithe sweep of her svelte figure, accentuated by the closely modeled gown and loose fur jacket whose sleeves were almost as wide as the jacket's crisp, short length. Muggsy Roberts called it "class." Wide-eyed, he watched from his table, while she walked regally toward him carrying the high piled coils of burnished copper hair on her head like a crown.

The fat barkeep was watching too. Furtively, pretending to wipe the bar

with a greasy cloth that streaked instead of dried; watching curiously from half-closed eyes.

Ike's basement bar, with the damp concrete steps that led to its entrance, illuminated at night by a crimson neon sign, had never numbered Mrs. William Rathborne, Jr., among its habitués. Ike's attracted the elite of a certain type, but never

those whose pictures appeared regularly in the rotogravure. But this woman's slim beauty was impressive against either an exotic or shoddy background.

Muggsy didn't get up when Vivian Rathborne approached the booth in which he was sitting. Muggsy was elite, too, and he considered himself as good as any dame, whether she had a surplus of the necessities or not.

"Nice gams," he thought, letting his gaze drift upward over silk-clad legs and clean sweep of thigh. Then, as the woman stopped beside his table, he lifted non-committal eyes and stared questioningly.

Vivian Rathborne flushed slightly under that penetrating stare. She hesitated almost perceptibly while she took in Muggsy's figure, from his glistening tan shoes that failed to match the dark herringbone suit and gaudy tie, to his swarthy skin and slick black hair.

"You're Muggsy Roberts?"

Her voice was musical, well modulated. *Class*, Muggsy thought, and hated her for it.

"Yeah."

She slid swiftly onto the bench across from him. "I want to talk to you. I heard you were the man to see."

"Yeah?"

The flat, uncompromising voice was momentarily disconcerting. She leaned forward slightly, the soft waves of her hair glinting in the pallid light.

"They told me—you would commit murder—for a price."

"Yeah?"

HER fingers, slender, well kept, fumbled with an oversize purse. Muggsy watched silently while she pulled out a roll of crisp bills and deftly counted off ten of one hundred dollar denomination.

Muggsy looked at the money speculatively, then lifted his eyes. The fat barkeep was cleaning the entire bar, mopping slowly, edging unobtrusively nearer their booth. Muggsy's eyes

were expressionless when he glanced toward him, but the fat man straightened as though jabbed in the back with a knife. One final defiant swish of his rag and he walked heavily to the opposite end of the bar. He began to rinse glasses with a loud clatter and splash of water. Muggsy looked at the woman.

"If that's for a rub-out, it ain't enough."

"There will be an equal amount mailed tomorrow to whatever address you wish. Provided of course, the murder is successfully committed tonight."

"Don't worry about that—I'll collect." Muggsy's lips moved, but his dark, saturnine face was unconcerned. "Who's the guy that gets bumped?"

"It's a woman."

"Dames is out of my line. What's her name?"

"The name doesn't matter. I'll give you all the necessary details as soon as I have your promise to co-operate."

Muggsy picked up his glass of beer, shook it until frothy bubbles rose to the top, and took a long swallow. "I promise nothing," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Just give me the dope."

"All right. At exactly nine o'clock this evening you are to drive to 1264 Broad Avenue. The house will be dark. Bring a flashlight with you, but don't use it until you are inside. The back door will be open. Go through the kitchen and turn to your left. There is a hallway there and at the end of it are stairs leading to the second floor.

"At the head of the steps you will find a door on the right. It will be open. Before entering the room, take a gun which you will find on a stand at the head of the stairs. It is that gun which you must use. From the doorway you can look into the room. Your victim will be sitting at the window.

"She is there every night and her silhouette will be a perfect target. Shoot her with the gun you take

from the stand and leave by the same way you entered. That is all there is to it. I'll write out those directions, if you prefer."

Muggsy's lips twitched. "I can remember."

"Then—you'll do it?"

Tiny lethal flames flickered for an instant in the depths of Muggsy's eyes. His hands closed over the money on the table, lifted it and tucked it securely into a pocket of his coat.

"Naw," he said. "I ain't takin' the job. But I'm charging you this grand for a bit of advice. I know all about you. Mrs. William Rathborne, Jr. The dame who gets her picture in the paper because she has a lot of dough, throws flashy parties and has a good-looking husband who don't have a cent.

"But I'm telling you this—" his low voice dropped menacingly—"next time you go slumming pick your places. Maybe you're figuring out a new gag for a party. Maybe not. Maybe you don't think I know you live at that address you just gave me. And you haven't figured out what the cops are gonna say when they learn you were in here talking to me a few hours before a dame gets bumped off in your home."

"All that has been taken care of."

"Okay. Whatever you say. But deal me out. And after this don't try to pull your wise stuff around here. It ain't smart and it ain't healthy!"

THE woman rose sleekly, imperturbable. There was fear in her eyes, but so far back that Muggsy couldn't see it.

"You will be paid for your services," she said coldly. "And I assure you this is no gag, as you call it. My only stipulation is that you use the gun provided for the purpose and which will be on the stand at the head of the stairs. Use gloves if you wish to leave the gun there. Take it with you if you desire."

Turning swiftly, she crossed the room without a backward glance,

pushed through the door and slowly mounted the concrete steps.

Muggsy lifted his glass of beer. "I'll be damned," he muttered, and swallowed it at a gulp. . . .

At exactly nine o'clock, Muggsy Roberts swung a gleaming black limousine into the curb and switched out the lights. The car was hot—so hot it had not yet been reported—and by the time its loss was discovered Muggsy wouldn't be needing it any more.

What he was about to do was against the principles of a first-class torpedo, but curiosity had got the best of Muggsy Roberts. It was a screwy setup, but no harm could come from having a gander at the place. Muggsy knew a lawyer who could squash a breaking and entry charge without thinking twice.

The Rathborne home was a virtual mansion set far back from the street and fronted by a wide lawn. Muggsy walked across soft grass that muffled his footsteps until he found himself at the rear of the house.

There was an eerie feeling of desertion about the huge stone building that sent little ripples along his spine. Muggsy shrugged away a momentary inclination to flee. Stepping forward, he placed a firm hand on the door-knob and turned it slowly. The door was unlocked. Muggsy darted swiftly through the opening and slid to one side, merging with the shadows. He stood quiet a long time, holding his breath, listening for alien sounds. There was nothing.

Like a furtive ghost, Muggsy moved noiselessly across the kitchen floor. Turning to the left, as he had been directed, he found himself in the hallway. Risking his flash, he saw the vague outline of the stairs at the far end of the corridor.

Up the wide, carpeted steps, to where the door on the right stood ajar. Perspiration beaded Muggsy's forehead as he peered cautiously into the room. Someone was there. Someone who sat wistfully at a window, gazing pensively outside. Moonlight,

glinting against the pane, formed a perfect frame.

Muggsy knew he was going through with it. He hadn't been sure, but now he was. But no sudden blast of gunfire for him. He didn't even look for the gun on the stand. It was probably there—every other arrangement had been perfect—but Muggsy was a craftsman who preferred to use his own tools. His own gun was fitted with a silencer. It would do a thorough job with a minimum of noise.

At the pressure of his finger on the trigger, the figure at the window slumped to the floor. Muggsy waited, but no sound broke the silence. Stepping catlike, Muggsy flicked the flash on the face of his victim. He had done his job well. Vivian Rathborne was very dead. With a strangled cry, Muggsy fled the room like a lost soul.

INSPECTOR DONOVAN of the homicide division surveyed the scene dispassionately. Mike Donovan was solidly built, with broad shoulders, a thick neck and a square head. His eyes were blue, deceptively innocent, and they peered wonderingly from under craggy brows.

Charlie Thatcher, his right-hand man, still prowled restlessly about the big Rathborne home. Thatcher wore his felt hat far back on his head. A tuft of red hair standing erect under the brim gave him an air of perpetual harassment. He had the air of a reporter who has just been scooped.

"There's absolutely nothing, Mike," he said worriedly. "No fingerprints, no nothing. Two forty-five slugs did the job, but the gun could be on the bottom of the ocean by now."

Donovan looked at the sheet-covered figure. "We've got to find the reason," he said gently. "There is always a motive when someone gets killed. You stay here while I talk to Rathborne again. Sometimes even a trivial, half-forgotten incident results in a crime. If he can just remember something—"

William Rathborne was a young man who showed the effects of good living. His clothing was sartorially perfect, but the whole effect was marred by the slight paunch which expert tailoring was unable to conceal. He was pacing back and forth in a tastefully furnished study, running agitated fingers through thinning brown hair at the end of each measured tread.

Perched on the edge of a straight chair, with his heels hooked onto a rung was an eight year old boy. The kid's eyes were wide and scared. They followed the man in his restless pacing.

Donovan eased into the room. Rathborne stopped his pacing and threw him a worried glance.

"Did you—find anything?"

The inspector shook his head. "Just take it easy, Mr. Rathborne," he advised in a matter-of-fact voice. "We're going to get things straightened out without any trouble. But you've got to help us."

"Help you?" Rathborne flung his arms wide, then pressed the palms of his hands against his temples. "Yes, that's the best, I believe. No one can hurt Ronnie now."

Donovan cleared his throat. "Ronnie? That's the boy, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ronnie is Vivian's son by a first marriage. He—he was kidnaped a week ago."

"Kidnaped?" Donovan's eyes gleamed. "I didn't think that was a paying proposition any more."

Rathborne laughed harshly. "The severeness of the penalty makes it even more profitable and safe. When we learned that Ronnie had been taken, we determined to follow instructions to the letter. No police. No phony packages of money. After all, the boy's life was at stake. If the police got even a whisper of what was going on, it would have been all up with him."

"I see." Donovan eyed the scared youngster. "How much did you pay out to get him back?"

"Not enough," Rathborne said harshly. "That's why Vivian was killed."

The inspector took a turn about the room. "Suppose you explain that," he said.

WILLIAM RATHBORNE took a deep breath. "The ransom asked was \$50,000," he said slowly. "We received our instructions through the mail. After each one was received we were to burn the letter."

"And did you?"

"Of course. We didn't want to take chances. Anything was better than jeopardizing the boy's life. All of the servants except a maid were given a month's vacation with pay in order to facilitate negotiations. We told the maid Ronnie was away on a visit."

"Where was the maid tonight?"

"This is her evening off."

"I see."

"Two days ago," Rathborne continued, "I was approached by a man who said he knew where the boy was being held. I took him at his word because only the kidnapers and ourselves knew the boy was gone."

"This man suggested that I pay him \$25,000 and he would return Ronnie. He would be getting more, he reasoned, than if the original ransom was paid and split up."

Donovan sat down in a chair and fumbled with his cigar. "So you paid the money and got the boy?"

"That's right. I brought him home tonight, expecting to surprise Vivian—and found her dead. I think one of the other men involved found out what had happened and took this way of exacting revenge."

"Just who was this money paid to?" the inspector asked quickly.

Rathborne ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. "I don't know. I was instructed to drive to a certain spot and wait. Another car pulled up and I paid out the money. Ronnie was in the back seat. I put him in my car and brought him home."

"And you don't remember what he looked like?"

"He wore a mask. And prior to that, all arrangements were conducted by mail."

"Too bad we didn't have a squad of men along that road," Donovan said regretfully. "After you got the boy we could have nabbed the guy without trouble."

The telephone jangled shrilly. Rathborne lifted the receiver. "It's for you," he said.

Headquarters was calling. Donovan took the message placidly.

"We've got your killer," the desk sergeant said urgently. "Muggsy Roberts just walked in and gave himself up. Even turned in the gun he says he did the job with."

Donovan chewed his cigar. "You say he gave himself up? Why?"

"It's a screwy story. You'd better come down and hear it personally."

CHARLIE THATCHER was visibly disturbed. In company with the inspector he had spent the greater part of the night grilling their prisoner. But Muggsy Roberts was a hard nut to crack. He talked readily, admitting everything, but why he had suddenly decided to pin the rap on himself was Muggsy's own personal secret.

"The whole thing smells," Thatcher said angrily. "Muggsy has been around for years. He's tough and smart. Not one conviction against him. Now he turns up with a headache like this."

"It's no headache of ours," Donovan said mildly. "Everything checked, didn't it? Muggsy wore gloves, so there weren't any fingerprints, but his gun matched the bullets taken from the body. He doesn't stand a chance. We ought to give him a vote of thanks for turning himself in."

Thatcher snorted. "Look, Mike. The guy was in the clear. Give me just one good reason why he didn't ditch that gun and stay in the clear."

Donovan dampened his finger and

carefully pasted a loose piece of tobacco against his cigar, then tucked it back in his mouth.

"Did you find the gun that was supposed to be on that stand?"

"Naw. The only gun in the house is a thirty-eight that Rathborne keeps in a desk in his study. This is it."

Donovan examined the weapon critically. He broke it and looked at the bullets.

"Blanks," he said succinctly.

"How about Mrs. Rathborne's will? Got that?"

"Right here."

The inspector unfolded the legal looking document and read slowly. days before the murder."

Thatcher stirred impatiently. "Look, Mike," he said. "We've got to do something—"

"Such as what? We've got our killer. What more do you want?"

"How about this kidnaping?"

"I'll turn the FBI loose on that." Donovan heaved himself out of his chair and reached for his hat. "But you might get hold of Rathborne and bring him in for a confab. Right away. I'm going out for a few minutes and I want him to be here when I get back."

Donovan's first stop was the bank, where he requested permission to check withdrawals from William Rathborne's personal account.

The cashier hesitated briefly. "Mr. Rathborne has no account," he said finally. "Everything was in his wife's name."

The inspector stared incredulously. "Doesn't he maintain even a small checking account?"

The cashier shook his head nervously. "I'll check again, inspector, but I am sure he doesn't."

Donovan waited patiently, trying to piece the fragments together in his mind. The cashier was smiling when he returned.

"I'm sorry, sir. We did no business with Mr. Rathborne whatsoever."

"How about his wife?"

"Mrs. Rathborne, yes. Her death was rather terrible, wasn't it? A lovely woman. Exactly what did you want to know?"

"Withdrawals," Donovan said stolidly. "Anything unusual the past week?"

"Nothing at all. We do have a package of \$50,000 in small bills which Mrs. Rathborne requested us to make up for her. She said she would call when she wanted it."

"And it's still here?"

"We have it in the vault. Would you care to see it?"

Donovan grinned. "Thanks. I'd like to see that much money sometime, but I haven't the time today."

PPOINTING the nose of his car west on Broad Avenue, the inspector raced in the direction of the Rathborne home. Things were beginning to shape up now, he thought grimly.

He rang the bell and waited until a trim maid in a form-fitting uniform opened the door.

"Inspector Donovan," he said, displaying his badge. "I want to go through the house."

"Certainly, sir." The maid dimpled prettily. "Come right in."

Donovan shed his coat and went to work. He didn't waste any time on the upper floors, but headed directly for the basement. At the end of half an hour he emerged grimy-handed, with cobwebs clinging to his hat. Slapping at his dusty trousers, Donovan cast a sidelong glance at the maid.

"How long have you worked here?" he asked casually.

"Three years, sir."

"In this house?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Rathborne purchased this place about six months ago."

"Um-m-m. And where is Ronnie?"

"I'll bring him in."

Donovan patted the youngster's head. "You come with me, sonny," he said mildly. "I need your help." With the boy in tow, the inspector headed back to the basement. They were there for a long time.

TSD

William Rathborne was waiting with ill-concealed impatience when Donovan returned.

"I'm willing to cooperate, inspector," he said irritably. "But at a time like this I can't be expected to wait indefinitely for you to keep an appointment."

Donovan waved him to a chair and motioned Thatcher from the room. "I want to have a little private chat with you," he said easily. "But first I wanted to have a look at the place where Ronnie was kept during the time he was kidnaped. It was a little harder to find than I figured."

"The place where Ronnie was kept!" Rathborne was on his feet. "Do you mean to tell me—"

"Yep." Donovan nodded sagely. "You were unable to give us any information so I had to dig some up by myself. That house of yours is pretty old. I had to hunt quite a while before I found the trapdoor in the basement. An old wine cellar, I expect. You probably discovered it accidentally and kept the knowledge to yourself."

Rathborne was breathing heavily. "I think it's time I have an explanation," he said furiously. "If you're accusing me of anything—"

Donovan grinned. "No accusations," he said mildly. "I just want to tell you a little story."

"First, we'll take a crook by the name of Muggsy Roberts. Muggsy has been around. He's tough and smart and knows the angles. According to his story your wife hired him to commit a little job of murder."

"The man's insane," Rathborne said hoarsely. "He's a confessed murderer. Surely you don't credit his lies."

DONOVAN settled back in his chair. "Somehow I do," he said. "Only Muggsy wasn't supposed to commit murder. He didn't know that, of course. He expected to kill a woman, but he didn't know that woman would be your wife. Nor would he have killed her had he fol-

lowed instructions and used the gun provided for the purpose.

"Had he used that gun there would have been a loud noise and a lot of screaming. Muggsy would undoubtedly have made his getaway, but cops would swarm all over the place. After all, an attempt on the life of Mrs. William Rathborne, Jr., is not to be taken lightly."

"I don't understand," Rathborne said dazedly. "Why would Vivian—"

Donovan studied his hands. "Look at it this way," he suggested. "Your wife's son has been kidnaped. She is willing to pay the ransom demanded, but somehow she learns that the boy is being kept in the basement of her own home. More than that, her own husband knows of this. Does he have someone helping guard the boy? Probably."

"Anyway, she is afraid to take the chance. Any unexpected move and the boy will be done away with. The police are the only ones who can help her. But if she comes to us and we send a squad of men to raid the house, the criminal—or criminals, if you please—will become suspicious."

"But she must have help. Help that will arrive in force and in a logical manner. And what more logical motive could the police have than an attempt on her life? Mrs. Rathborne promotes the deal with Muggsy. It's a chance, but she can't see any other way out. If he uses the gun she tells him to nothing will happen. That gun is loaded with blanks."

"If the plan works there will be plenty of cops around, but the criminals won't be alarmed. In the excitement she may find a chance to tip someone off and rescue the boy. Unfortunately, Muggsy used his own weapon."

Rathborne had regained his composure. "The man is still guilty of murder," he murmured.

"Granted. But why did he turn himself in? After all, he had done the job he thought he was supposed to do."

"You tell me."

Donovan leaned forward. "I can tell you why. Muggsy had no intention of killing your wife. By so doing, he killed the goose that was to lay the golden egg. In other words, Muggsy was in on the snatch. Your wife was expected to foot the bill. Of course, they could collect from you, but Muggsy's mistake forfeited his own life.

"His friends were playing a dangerous game—too dangerous for blunders. Muggsy would have been wiped out. So he gave himself up to the police. He stands a slim chance of drawing life for this murder. With his friends he would have stood no chance at all."

William Rathborne stifled a yawn with a manicured finger. "It's an interesting story," he agreed. "But why tell it to me?"

"I have only one reason," Donovan admitted. "I happen to know that you don't have a penny of your own money. A jury might consider that an excellent motive for you to have your stepson kidnaped so that you could share the ransom."

Rathborne laughed tightly. "Your imagination does you credit," he said slowly. "But your little fairy tale won't hold water. You can't prove a thing."

"I think we can," Donovan poked the end of his cigar through a smoke ring. "I knew the boy was confined in the house because your wife went to such extreme measures to get help on hand. She was afraid of you—afraid that you might have a guard with the boy. But her plan backfired, and when you returned home and saw what had happened you realized there was no need to continue with the abduction."

"You automatically became heir to the money you were resorting to crime to get. So you pulled a double-cross, freed the boy, 'discovered' the murder of your wife and called the police."

"That's a lie," Rathborne said flat-

ly. "I didn't know my wife had been killed until I returned with the boy."

THE inspector shook his head. "It won't do," he said. "I know that you came back. You saw the gun on the stand—the gun Muggsy didn't use—and put it in your desk drawer where we found it. It didn't take much figuring on your part to dope out a change of plan. But no \$25,000 was drawn from your wife's account."

"She had the ransom money ready, but it was never used. You rescued the boy yourself, putting a cloth around his head so he couldn't see and pretending to put him in another car. When you took the blindfold off, Ronnie thought you had come to take him home."

William Rathborne tapped out a cigaret and lighted it negligently. "You have a good mind, inspector," he smiled. "I wouldn't be surprised but what you are commissioner some day. And I don't mind admitting that you are exactly right in your deductions. But proving them will be another thing."

"You don't know what it is like to be married to a wealthy woman. A woman who has money to burn, but who makes her husband ask for every cent he spends." He looked at his feet. "These shoes, for example. They cost eighteen dollars, but I had to ask Vivian for the money before I was able to buy them. Is it any wonder that I rebelled?"

Donovan sucked at his cigar, but made no reply. Rathborne stared hard at him a moment and then continued.

"I finally reached the stage where I was willing to do anything. I made arrangements to have Ronnie abducted, but I also arranged that he be kept in the house. I didn't want anything to happen to him, and the other parties involved were willing to cooperate. I ran the risk of keeping the boy while they collected the money."

"I'm admitting now that my story

of the \$25,000 was false, but I will pay off the boys who were hired for the actual abduction. Muggsy won't do anything because he doesn't know I was in on the deal."

"You're doing pretty good," Donovan nodded approvingly, "but I'm way ahead of you. In the first place, when Muggsy learns from me that you were behind the kidnaping and that you are paying off his confederates while he goes to the chair, he's going to turn state's evidence and implicate you as well as his pals."

"You're going to have a lot of explaining to do, especially about how the boy was kept a prisoner in his own home without you being aware of it."

Rathborne laughed confidently. "Money can do a lot of things," he said contemptuously. "If you try to prove your ridiculous story I'll have a battery of expensive lawyers who will make you look like a hick. I'll pay off the boys, and Muggsy's story won't even reach the jury."

Donovan stood up. "You're entirely right," he said regretfully. "But I'm bringing Thatcher and a police stenographer in here. I want you to dictate a complete confession to them and sign it. That's the only way I'll have an airtight case."

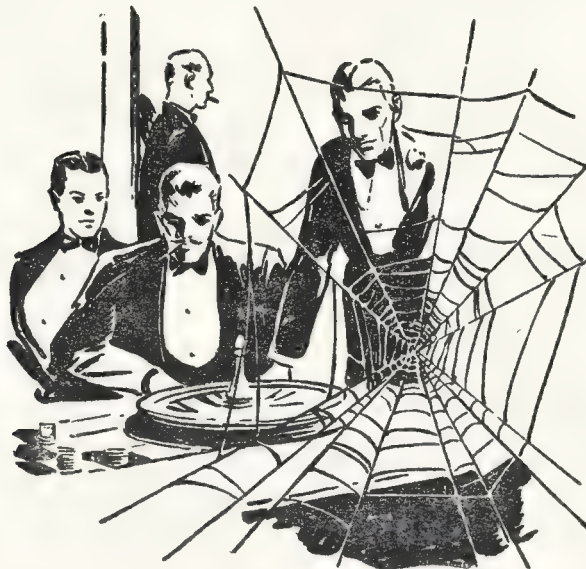
Rathborne laughed harshly, but Donovan's words cut him short. "If you don't," he said mildly, "I won't even push charges against you. I don't know who your playmates were—I'm depending on you to tell us that—but they mustn't be very nice. Rather than face them Muggsy Roberts was willing to take a murder rap square on the chin. If you don't confess I'll turn you loose to see what they will do to you—when they find you welshing on the snatch payoff."

"You fool! I'm not welshing. The boys will get their money."

Donovan shook his head. "The only debt you will pay is the one you owe to the state. Your wife was wise to you, remember, and two days before she died she made a will. That will names her son as sole heir, with the First National Bank as trustee. She left you exactly one dollar and I'm afraid that won't be enough to satisfy your friends."

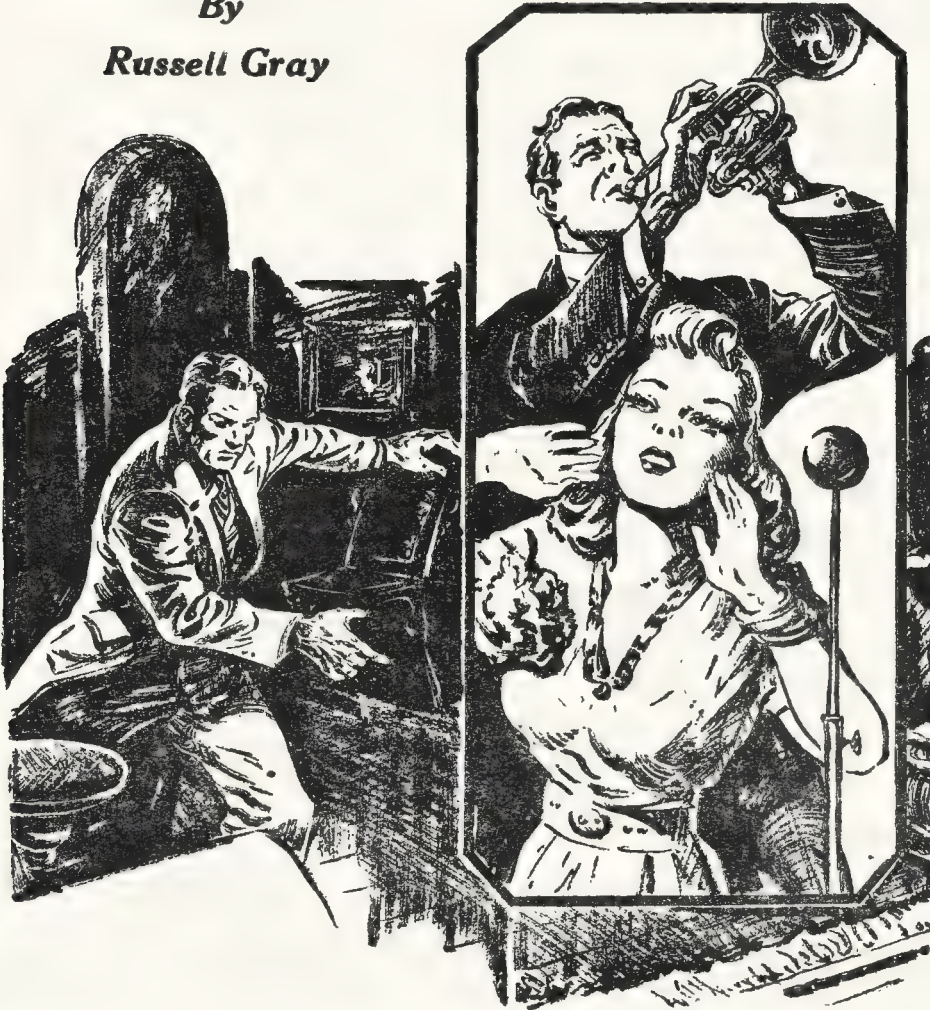
He waited a moment, watching Rathborne cover his pale face with shaking hands. Donovan touched a bell on his desk.

"The stenographer will be here in a minute," he said. "Get ready to talk."



Satan's Scandal Sheet

By
Russell Gray



¶ *Lieutenant Durkee came to Miami for a holiday—a holiday from cutthroats and killers. But instead of basking in the sunshine, he became engulfed in a crime wave of gamblers' guns.* ¶

I WAS sitting with my back against a cocoanut palm, diligently constructing a sand pyramid between my legs, when a fur-bearing animal came along. It walked on two feet and sported flowered swimming trunks

and carried a dazzling beachrobe over one arm. It went several feet past me, stopped dead, turned slowly, and charged at me with hand outstretched.

"Well, well, well," it said. "Lieutenant Durkee!"

At home I would have disdained to shake Mark Gregg's hand, but fourteen hundred miles from your stamping ground makes a difference. He squatted beside me, from the neck down hard to distinguish from an ape. The face, however, was human enough, even rather pleasant in a weak, none-too-bright way. Some men, and women for that matter, should under no circumstances ever appear in bathing suits.

I said: "What are you doing on the beach in the afternoon, with horses running at Hialeah and Tropical?"

Mark Gregg shook his head dolefully. "I was in Hialeah only once. Neat looking place with royal palms and flamingos on a lake inside the track. I cleaned up better than six hundred bucks." He sighed. "But they got dog tracks down here—so many you hit one any way you spit. Well, that same night somebody dragged me to one. Lieutenant, did you ever see the dogs run?"

"Several times."

"When you bet on a horse, you know if he comes in first you collect. But dogs! They got something called quinellas. You pick two mutts in each race, and they got to come in in one-two or two-one order or you're out of luck. Then that devil's invention called the Daily Double. Yeah, I know some horse tracks take double bets, but with me they're strictly poison. You pick two winners in two races or you don't collect a cent, and the odds never click right anyway."

"There's nothing to stop you from betting on first, place or show," I pointed out.

"Nothing!" he practically shrieked. "Nothing but the odds. Look. The first time I was at the dog track the double paid \$179. The quinellas paid anywhere from \$12 to \$130. How can a guy like me resist such odds, even though they should be twice as good."

"And so you've dropped plenty?"

"Plenty? Ten times as much. And yesterday, when I finally hit a

quinella combination, what happens? On the nose for the mutt that finished first paid \$14.40, but picking the first and second paid only \$8.60. Is that a system?"

"That's what happens with the pari-mutuel machines," I said. "The quinella got a heavier play than first place."

"Yeah." Mark Gregg leaned over close to me. "Being as you and me are both New Yorkers—"

"So are half the people at Miami Beach."

"But you're a right guy, lieutenant. You gave me a break the time I slugged Joe Spinell on account he was trying to welsh. All right. Play Whosis and Sun Gal on the Daily Double tonight at Bayshore."

I smiled. "What's your cut if they come through?"

He looked aggrieved. "This tip is just out of friendship, lieutenant." He spread his hands. "Of course, if you want to show your appreciation—"

I WISHED suddenly he'd get the hell away from me. I don't like gamblers any way you look at them. And when they're the cheap borderline hangers-on, betting when they can scrape up a few bucks and touting when they can't, they turn my stomach.

I was just about to tell him off when a dream in a couple of skimpy white strips meandered by. Semi-nudity doesn't mean much on a beach, and there is an abundance of beauteous girls in Miami, but this one caused a minor commotion. She was tall, moving with long-limbed undulating grace, and was filled out only in the places where it did the most good. She glanced in our direction and smiled.

Mark Gregg said, "Hi, Betty."

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

He smacked his lips. "A special friend. Don't you know her? Betty Boyer. Comes from the Big Town. Sings and dances."

"Singers and dancers aren't up my

alley, unless they kill somebody."

"They're up mine any time. Especially when they got what Betty's got. She does her stuff at Augie Shor's Club on the County Causeway."

"Nice lad, Augie," I said. "He killed a girl a couple of years ago. A playmate of his. I was handling the case, and I'm afraid I didn't do so good. Couldn't get enough evidence to convince a jury."

Gregg looked worried. "Yeah, I wish I could get her away from that dive. Maybe I will—after tonight." He picked up his magnificent beachrobe. "I'll be seeing you, lieutenant."

I shifted out from under the palm tree and lay back with the sun pouring down on me. What could a swell looker like Betty Boyer see in a four-flusher like Mark Gregg? Unless she had fallen for his line, which was pretty slick until you caught on. For instance, tossing off that nonchalant remark that he'd made six hundred bucks at Hialeah.

It might just possibly be true, but the odds were that, as usual, he was trying to play big-timer. His tale of woe about the wad he was dropping at the dog tracks was part of the same. He was a two-buck bettor and a chiseler and a cheap tout, and he'd never be anything else.

After I'd got my torso well baked, I shook the sand off me and made my way through sprawling bodies to the water. There were plenty of folks dunking themselves, and among them were Mark Gregg and Betty Boyer.

I could distinguish him from a mile away by his hairy torso. And when the waves receded from her, revealing her to the hips, that build of hers could be recognized anywhere as well. They were doing a lot of splashing and giggling, and I found myself thinking again how she could go for a mug like that.

I made sure not to get too close to them. I could easily do without Gregg's company. After disporting myself for about ten minutes, I figured I'd had enough and started out.

The lifeguard's booth in front of which I had entered the water was now about a block to my left. I saw that a mob had gathered in front of the booth and that people were running from all directions.

BECAUSE of my job it would seem that I'd shed any morbid curiosity about drownings and similar accidents. But on the way back to where I'd left my robe, I had to pass through the densest part of the gawkers. A couple of lifeguards were up to their hips in the ocean and pulling somebody out.

Somebody in the mob said: "He wasn't far out enough to drown. Maybe a stingaree stung him."

"That's crazy," somebody else said. "Stingarees aren't that bad."

The lifeguards were almost out of the water now, carrying the man between them. And I saw that hairy pelt and started running toward them.

"Get the police!" one of the lifeguards was yelling. "This man has been murdered!"

Mark Gregg was dead when I got close enough to take a good look at him. Probably he had been the moment he had sunk under water. His right side had been ripped open from armpit to hipbone. Although a lot of the blood had been washed away by the water, there was still plenty flowing out.

I looked around for Betty Boyer. I didn't see her, but I did see Augie Shor. He was a well-knit bronzed man in the late thirties—quite a lad with the ladies, one of whom, I was pretty sure, he had murdered in cold blood. Languidly he pulled out a cigar as he looked down at Gregg's body from a distance of twenty feet or so. I don't know if he'd noticed me. Maybe he had because he was trying too hard not to look in my direction.

By the time the first of the cops came, Augie Shor had slipped out of view. Betty Boyer still hadn't appeared. Funny, I thought. She'd been swimming with Gregg ten minutes

ago. If nothing else, the commotion should have attracted her.

A couple of more cops arrived and cleared a space around the body. I took up a post at the edge of the crowd. A sheet appeared from somewhere and a cop dropped it over what was left of Mark Gregg. Then another cop yelled:

"Anybody here see it or was near the man when he went under?"

A boy and girl in their late teens edged shyly forward and started talking to the cops in undertones. After half a minute a bald-headed guy and then a husky young fellow joined them.

Presently a group of men in plain-clothes broke through. A thick-set, gray-haired man was in charge. He took a peek at the body, then spoke to the cops and witnesses. When he seemed to have absorbed the idea, I stepped forward.

"Pardon me," I said. "I can identify the corpse."

"That's fine. Who is he?"

"Mark Gregg, a small-time gambler. He came here from New York for the Hialeah races, but has been spending most of his time at the dog tracks."

"Were you well acquainted with him?" The detective was one of the few men I'd met in Miami who had a genuine Southern accent.

"Not too well. We had a talk twenty or thirty minutes before he was murdered. He'd been palling around with a girl named Betty Boyer who dances at Augie Shor's Club. I saw them in the water together a little while before his body was dragged out."

His light gray eyes ran over me scathingly. "Were you here all along?"

"I was in the water, a few hundred feet away when he was stabbed."

"Why'd you wait so long to tell us you knew him?"

I grinned. "Why waste time on the patrolmen? And I knew you'd want to question the witnesses first." His face

started getting sore, as mine would have if I'd come up against somebody like me. So I added quickly: "You see, I'm a cop myself. Lieutenant Claude Durkee of the New York Police."

HE STRETCHED out a hand. "Glad to know you, lieutenant. I'm Sergeant Swanson. Here on business?"

"Just a vacation."

"Anyway, it's lucky that you happen to be around. There may be a New York angle you can help us out on."

"Glad to," I said. "Do the witnesses know anything?"

Swanson shrugged. "It was a clever job. They remembered seeing him in the water, and then a minute or two later that young fellow over there saw a wave hit a body that was just under the surface and didn't seem to be getting up. He grabbed him and felt the body was limp and sang out for the lifeguard."

"Did anybody see the girl with Gregg?"

"What girl?"

"The one I told you about—Betty Boyer. I looked for her right after the body was dragged out, but she wasn't around."

"Say, you've got something."

I tagged after Swanson to where the four witnesses were standing whispering to each other. Only one of them had noticed Betty, and that was the young girl. "Because she was so stunning," the girl said. "Yes, she was with that poor man."

"How long was she with him before the body was found?" Swanson asked.

"Well, I couldn't say. You see, we swam out a little farther for a while, and when we came back to shallow water, neither of them were in sight. That is, I didn't pay any special attention to whether or not they were nearby—there were so many people about—until this man started yelling that somebody was drowning."

Swanson turned to the man who had discovered the body. "And you

didn't notice a tall good-looking young woman in a white bathing suit?"

"No, sir. I'd just come into the water about a minute before."

Then I told Swanson about Augie Shor. There was very little I could tell except that he knew Gregg and that he'd been right there on the beach.

Swanson rubbed his chin and then looked me over again and asked: "You say you weren't near them yourself?"

"I was for half a minute or so, then I moved farther over toward the—let's see—north." I smiled. "Of course you'd be silly to take my word that I'm a policeman. I can show my credentials easily enough if you'll send a man with me to my hotel."

Swanson shook his head. "You wouldn't lie about that. Too easy to check." He thought that over and then said: "Still, I guess I'll send somebody along. Thanks for helping us, lieutenant."

"I wasn't much help."

"You never can tell," Swanson said.

A PATROLMAN accompanied me to my hotel and I satisfied him as to my identity. When he'd gone, I slid out of my trunks and took a shower and then stretched out on the bed and tried to nap. It wasn't any use. I told myself that now there was a good chance that my vacation would be ruined. When murder investigation is a daily routine, you look at it only as work, and I'd come to Miami to lie in the sun and do very little else.

Several hours later I was about to leave for dinner when there was a knock on my door. A big man with the face of a movie idol stepped into my room and said:

"Hello, lieutenant. Remember me?"

"Sure. You were one of the plain-clothes men on the beach."

"Bill Raft," he said. He seated himself on the only chair in the room and carefully crossed his legs. "Sergeant

Swanson is busy at headquarters with a couple of suspects, so he sent me down to see you."

"Any fresh suspects?" I asked. "Or just Betty Boyer and Augie Shor?"

"In a way I guess everybody who was on that section of the beach can be called a suspect," he said. "Somebody moved over beside Gregg with the knife hidden in his bathing suit. When a high wave came, it was simple to slit Gregg's side open and then ease away. People are always ducking under the water; it wouldn't mean anything if Gregg suddenly dropped down. People don't watch each other to see if they're coming up again."

"What about the knife?" I asked. "The killer would have dropped it at once in the water to get rid of it."

"It's being hunted for, but the tide was pretty sure to have carried it out."

"It's a chance anyway. Water doesn't necessarily wipe off fingerprints."

"True enough, but we can't bank on that kind of break," Raft said. "The fact remains that anybody on the beach could have done it, but our job is to narrow the circle to the people who knew Gregg and were on the spot. Well, we know three already. Augie Shor says that he wasn't in the water at all. He can't prove that he wasn't and we can't prove that he was."

"Betty Boyer says that she had an appointment with a hairdresser, and that she just went in for a dip with Gregg and then rushed to keep her appointment. We checked with the beauty parlor and she was right about the appointment."

"Doesn't mean a thing," I said. "She could have knifed Gregg and then hurried to the beauty parlor. The time element can't be shaded fine enough to provide her with an alibi."

"We know that, but at the same time it's not enough to hold her."

I sat down on the bed. "You said there were three suspects."

Raft fingered the immaculate crease

of his trousers. "How long since you hit town?"

"Four days."

"And the first you saw of Betty Boyer or Augie Shor or Mark Gregg was on the beach just before the murder?"

"That's right, except that I saw Shor after the murder."

RAFT said: "Doesn't it strike you funny—three pals of yours popping up at that spot? The beach is pretty big."

"Not pals. I never met Betty Boyer before. Gregg I had little use for, and I have even less for Augie Shor."

"You tried to send Shor to the chair once."

"So you phoned New York?"

"Sure." Raft lit a cigaret and said casually: "How do you like our kennel clubs?"

"Don't know that I approve of them. They're even more of a gamblers' paradise than horse tracks. We don't have a thing to do with them in my state."

"I know. That's one reason a lot of New Yorkers come down here." He leaned forward. "What the hell! A little off-duty relaxation and maybe some advice on the way the hounds run from a guy like Mark Gregg who's been living at the tracks."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Raft."

"Maybe I am." He went to the door and turned. "Maybe," he repeated. "But I've heard of cops committing murder."

I stood up and sank my hands deep in my pants pockets. "So now I'm a suspect? Frankly, I don't like your method. Why tip me off?"

He flushed angrily. "You trying to tell us how to run our department?"

"No," I said. "Good-by."

The door closed softly behind him. I stood staring at the door and my hands were clenched in my pockets. What a riding the boys in my squad would give me if they found out I had become a Grade A suspect in a mur-

der case. Not that I blamed the local police for being curious about me. After all, I had been one of the very few people on the beach who had known Mark Gregg and I had been close enough to him to have killed him. But all the same I didn't like it.

While I was eating I resolved to take in a movie and then go to bed. But at eight-fifteen I was slapping down my twenty-five cents at the window of the Bayshore Kennel Club on the mainland.

The first race was just starting. By the time I reached the stands the dogs flashed over the finish line, it was over that quickly. I went down to the parimutuel windows and looked over the odds. The next race would be the first half of the Daily Double, and sure enough a dog named Whosis was running in that one and a dog named Sun Gal in the next. The double on those two hounds was \$130, and neither of them was anywhere near the favorites.

I'd never in my life bet a cent on races of any sort, but after a brief internal struggle I bought a five-dollar ticket on that particular double.

By the time the dogs were led out for the second race, the odds on the combination had gone down to \$27.80. I smiled to myself. There was no doubt that Mark Gregg had got inside dope, but a lot of people had done likewise and were playing the double for all it was worth.

Whosis took first in a walk. There'd be no payoff, however, unless Sun Gal repeated the performance in the third race. She did, by a head, and I went down to collect, thinking of what I could have cleaned up if I'd ventured a couple of hundred bucks. If Mark Gregg had lived a few hours more, he would have been a rich man, even at the depressed odds.

AS I approached one of the Daily Double windows, I saw Augie Shor standing in line. I hung back, waiting until it was his turn. Then I moved over on his left side and got a

glimpse of the pile of bills the cashier shoved across to him. Shor caught sight of me and slapped his hand over the money and stuffed the fortune hastily into his pocket.

He tossed a grin at me. "Hello, copper. I see you've also succumbed to the lure of the greyhounds."

"They're very entertaining if you know in advance how they'll run."

"That's a cop for you," he said. "His graft has to be a sure thing."

I would have liked to have smacked him. Not especially for that crack, but because I'd been itching to since the day I'd pulled him in for the murder of his girl friend. But I didn't want a minor scandal, so I showed him my back, and stepped to the end of the line.

This time I was the one being watched cashing a ticket. Not by Shor; he'd headed straight for the exit. It was Detective Bill Raft, leaning against the side of a beer stand and making indolent smoke rings. When I'd placed the money in my wallet, he strolled over to me.

"So the very moral New York cop who hates gambling doesn't mind taking a little profit for himself," Raft said softly.

"Merely an experiment in criminology," I told him. "I was always curious to find out how much five dollars brings when one's on the inside."

"Not as much as it should have," he said, watching me closely to see how I could take it.

I played along. "That's because poor dumb Mark Gregg did too much talking before he died."

"That's just about it. He shot off his mouth to the killer."

I sighed. "Your attempts at being subtle are depressing. You're wasting your time tailing me."

"I'm getting paid for it."

"All right, then you're wasting the city's money," I said.

Outside the kennel club, I paused for a couple of minutes in indecision and then took a taxi back to Miami Beach. To hell with it, I thought. I'm

here on vacation. And I stopped off at a movie theater.

In the lobby a cute little blonde in a white nurse's hat was collecting money for the Red Cross. I nearly bowled her over by handing her all my winnings. It wasn't that I was particularly noble, but there are some things a guy can't do without hating himself, and holding on to dishonest dough is one of them.

The picture wasn't bad, but don't ask me what it was about. I left before it was half over and taxied over to the County Causeway. It was no use, I told myself. I was like a fire-horse who quivers at the sound of an alarm. In addition, this particular murder was beginning to affect me directly, at least in the eyes of the local police.

I arrived at Augie Shor's Club between shows. The place was four-fifths empty and the musicians radiated boredom as they lounged on the bandstand. I went to the bar and ordered a rum Collins and, drink in hand, turned to have a look.

BETTY BOYER was at a table with three middle-aged couples. They seemed astounded that they weren't having a wild time, although they were obviously impressed by the fact that Betty Boyer had been delegated to pep them up. She was doing a terrible job of it. Her smiles were sickly and forced when any of the men spoke to her and she couldn't keep her fingers from drumming on the table.

A runt in a dazzling slack suit appeared in the doorway and swept the place with his eyes until he found Betty. I realized then that she'd been watching for him. He nodded unhappily at her and sidled along the wall till he came to a door leading to the rest rooms. Betty excused herself and went after him.

I was about half a minute behind. I opened the door a couple of inches and saw Betty and the runt standing in a corridor in front of a door marked

WOMEN. The runt handed her money, mumbled something I couldn't catch, and left her. I gave him room to come out through the doorway, then went through it myself, the other direction.

Betty was counting the money. She heard my steps and glanced up and thrust the bills where any woman would in an emergency. She started down the corridor toward where I assumed the dressing room would be.

"Whosis and Sun Gal paid off, didn't they?" I said softly.

She spun. In a slinky evening gown she was as pleasant to look at as she had been in her bathing suit.

"What of it?" she snapped.

"Not a thing, except that Mark Gregg was murdered because he knew that particular double was going to collect."

"No!" Her head shook as if it were attached to a wire. "No!" Then she demanded: "Who are you?"

"Don't you remember me? The lad who was on the beach with Mark Gregg a few minutes before he was killed."

"The New York detective!" Just then the door to the ladies' room swung open and a buxom young thing came out. Betty waited until she was gone, then said: "Come with me."

I tagged after her to her dressing room. She shut the door and locked it and faced me. She was breathing hard, waiting for me to go on talking.

"How'd you know I was a cop?" I asked.

"The police told me. They said it was no use lying to them because you'd seen me in the water with Mark. But I wasn't going to lie. Honest, I didn't know Mark was dead until I returned to my hotel from the beauty parlor and found a detective waiting for me."

I assumed the fatherly pose. "Still, you're in a spot, sister, but because we're both from the same town I'd like to help you out. What were you to Mark Gregg?"

SHE drew herself up haughtily. "Mark and I were going to be married. He was one of the few kind men I had ever met. And he was rich. He was going to take me away from this rotten racket and the contemptible men who run it."

"In short, Augie Shor was trying his line on you and you didn't go for it. You preferred matrimony, and you wanted plenty of dough attached to the blessed state. You fell for Gregg's line that he was oozing wealth—"

"Line?" she said.

"That's right. He talked a million and often hadn't the price of coffee in his jeans."

"I don't believe it!"

"It doesn't matter now," I said. "How'd you come to bet on that Daily Double?"

"I had a tip."

"And you passed it on to Gregg?"

"Why not? Mr. Shor told me—" She bit off the rest and her eyes widened. "You said Mark was murdered because he knew what dogs would win the double?"

"That's right. And Augie Shor gave you the tip?"

She was careful not to look at me. "Last night Mr. Shor tried to force his attentions on me. I slapped his face. Instead of getting mad, he just laughed and asked me not to tell anybody. He said that if I didn't he'd do me a favor—I should bet on Whosis and Sun Gal. Later that night Mark was complaining to me how he couldn't beat the dogs, so I passed the tip along."

"And you took a flier yourself?"

"Only a five-dollar ticket. I seldom bet. That was a bookie you saw giving me money."

I said: "Thanks, Betty. I think you've made things easy for yourself. Is Shor around?"

"I saw him about an hour ago. His office is two doors down. Do you think he—"

"You'll find out soon enough," I told her.

The door was marked MANAG-

ER'S OFFICE. I knocked and there was no answer, so I returned to the main hall. The musicians were still drowsing. Augie Shor wasn't in the place, but Bill Raft was. He stood at the bar watching me out of the corner of his eye. I sat down at a table and ordered another rum Collins.

After a while a waiter came hurrying out of the door leading to the corridor and made straight for Raft. Raft listened for ten seconds, then glanced hastily at me and went into the corridor. My fingers tightened about the tall, cool glass. Something was up.

In less than a minute the same waiter came out again, searched the room with his eyes and then sidled over to me. He took his time, the excitement gone from his movements, but his facial muscles were still tight. He tapped me on the shoulder and bent over from the hips to whisper in my ear:

"Pardon me, are you Mr. Durkee?"

I nodded.

"Detective Raft wants to see you in Mr. Shor's private office," he said.

"Anything happen?"

The waiter's eyes showed that plenty had. But all he said was: "I'll show you the way, sir."

"I was just about to leave to keep an appointment," I told him, "so I'll have to call up saying I'll be detained."

"The telephone booths are right next to the cloakroom, sir."

I ASKED the operator to get me police headquarters, and then a couple of anxious minutes passed before Sergeant Swanson was located.

"Ah, hello, lieutenant," Swanson said. "I suppose you want to know if we got anywhere on the murder of your friend Mark Gregg."

I let that "friend" go without comment. I said: "Look here, sergeant, if you think I'm implicated in the murder, why not have me down at headquarters and go through the regular

routine? I don't like being dogged by one of your men."

"Dogged? I don't get it."

"I'm referring to the fact that you clamped Bill Raft on my tail. After all, some degree of courtesy is due a fellow officer who is spending a vacation in your city."

There was a pause at the other end of the wire. Then Swanson's soft drawl, sounding genuinely apologetic: "I'm sure there's some mistake, lieutenant."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "We can talk it over when you come to Augie Shor's Club to look into the trouble."

"What trouble?"

I put everything I could into my voice. "Good Lord, haven't you heard?" And I hung up.

In the corridor an uneasy group stood talking in hushed tones. All the voices stopped when I appeared. Betty Boyer was leaning against the wall with both hands to her bosom. Her eyes were pinpoints, staring at me with horror. Bill Raft was drawing on a cigaret and the corners of his mouth smiled with satisfaction. In addition, there was the waiter who had given me Raft's message and another waiter and a man in evening clothes.

Raft said: "When you left Miss Boyer's room, lieutenant, you went into Mr. Shor's office?"

The door to the office was closed. I shook my head. "All I did was knock. There was no answer, so I went away."

"That's what you say." Raft blew smoke at me. "This is the second time in ten hours that you've been at the spot where murder was committed. This time we have you dead to rights."

So it was murder! I'd thought of it when Raft had sent for me, but I hadn't really believed it until now.

Raft opened the door. "See for yourself, Durkee."

I went past him into the room. Raft followed me and stepped to the side of the door and kicked the door shut with his heel, so that those in the cor-

ridor couldn't tell which of us had closed it. I heard a click and turned my head to see the snap-lock catch. Then I looked at the corpse.

Augie Shor was lying on his back in front of the streamlined desk. The ornate hilt of a paper-knife protruded from his throat.

I can't say that I was sorry to see the rat dead. Don't get me wrong—I don't approve of murder. I would have been a lot happier if he had gone out the legal way, sitting on the hot seat for the killing of the girl in New York.

RAFT was saying loudly: "The method is the same—a knife in both cases. It's safer and quieter than a bullet. The knife you killed Gregg with you dropped into the ocean, and the carved handle of this paper-knife wouldn't take your prints. But you made a lot of mistakes, Durkee."

I moved a few feet to where a light chair stood. I closed one hand over it, as if leaning against it. I didn't say anything. Raft's hand was inside his coat. He'd be carrying his gun in his belt, and he was banking on the fact that, off duty and on vacation, I wouldn't have a gun with me. He was right.

Raft was still talking, keeping his voice loud. It was vague, ambiguous stuff about my having tried to railroad Shor to the chair because of a personal grudge against him, and that I'd probably had another against Gregg.

It didn't make much sense, but it didn't have to. He was talking for the benefit of those out in the corridor, who couldn't remember the exact substance of what he was saying, but would remember that he'd been accusing me.

When he got ready, which would be any second now, he'd shoot. On the desk I noticed a paper-knife that was a mate to the one in Shor's throat. Raft's story would be that when he'd accused me I'd realized that the game was up and had grabbed the knife and

made for him and that then he'd had to shoot me in self-defense.

It was pretty good.

He was saying: "And so I arrest you for the murder of—"

That was when I threw the chair at him. He wasn't ready for the move, and the chair legs were off the ground before he went for his gun. It flew straight at his head. He flung himself aside at the same time he fired, so of course the bullet went wild. The chair clipped him in the temple and he went stumbling backward.

I dove low and caught his legs, and the back of his head thudded against the wall with an awful smack. His eyes glazed, but he didn't go all the way out. His gun was waving crazily. I kicked it out of his hand.

"You were right," I panted. "Cops have been known to commit murder." And I picked up his chair and banged it down on his head for good measure.

Then I had a chance to hear the yelling outside in the corridor and the pounding on the door. I clicked open the lock. Sergeant Swanson, gun in hand, plunged through. He looked at Raft, moaning and bloody on the floor, and then at me, and he jabbed his gun in my direction.

"Don't bother, sergeant," I said. "Raft's the killer. I was to be his third victim because he was afraid that I was catching on to his game. You'll find that gun on the floor is his and that it has only his prints on it and that I'm unarmed."

SWANSON couldn't get anything out of Raft at that time, but the next day he confessed. It wouldn't have mattered one way or the other because investigation of his private affairs plastered guilt all over him. I'd tabbed the business more or less accurately when, later that evening, I made my statement at headquarters.

"Raft and Augie Shor were both in the crooked work at the track," I said. "Raft, being a detective, had inside dope and so could ease himself in with

the bad boys of the tracks. Shor had always been playing along with his fellow rats. They were set for their big killing tonight.

"The trouble started when Shor, in a weak moment, passed on the tip to Betty Boyer to keep from raising a fuss over his getting fresh with her. She could have ruined his club. She passed on the tip to Mark Gregg. He was never one to keep his mouth shut, and anyway he figured he could pick up a little extra by touting.

"Raft heard about Gregg shooting his mouth off and it bothered him. The more people who played that double, the more the odds would be depressed. The size of the odds would make a difference of a lot of thousands, and there was only one way to shut Gregg up. Raft must have thought he'd done a pretty slick job, stabbing Gregg in the water and then hurrying into his clothes and getting back in time to cover the case with his squad.

"The irony is he did it all for nothing, because Gregg had talked to enough bettors to force the odds way down on the machines. But Raft had another headache besides that. Shor, of course, had caught wise at once who had murdered Gregg. Chances are he tried blackmail, holding out for the entire haul in return for his silence.

"Well, that could work the other way around too. With Shor dead,

Raft would eliminate a constant blackmail threat, besides retaining for himself the entire profits. Along with that, get rid of me, who seemed to be hot on his trail, and he'd be sitting pretty. If my throw of that chair had been less accurate, he would have got away with it."

Sergeant Swanson clucked his tongue. "But how did you get wise?"

"Not exactly wise, but I considered the possibility when he came to my hotel room to cross-examine me. To begin with, you would have come yourself. My position as an officer entitled me to at least that. Raft said you couldn't come because you were busy at headquarters with suspects, and then in the next breath told me the suspects had been released.

"And I didn't like some of his questions. He was trying to pump me for information about how much I knew about the rigged race. I figured there was a chance he was keeping an eye on me simply to see how much I knew or would find out. Then, when you told me over the phone that you hadn't detailed him to tail me, I was fairly sure."

"And yet you went unarmed into that room with him?"

I shrugged. "A trifle careless, I'll admit, but it did force him into a play that proved his guilt." I stood up. "And now I'll go back to vacationing."



Elegy for an Alibi

By Guy Fleming

Albert Wahl thought that every cog was in the right place when he contrived the perfect crime—until the wheels of fate skidded him onto hell's crimson-rutted highway.



ALBERT WAHL sat in the back room of his loan office, reading a mystery book. The shrewd, dark eyes in his hollow-jawed face

were avidly absorbing the print. Suddenly he slammed the book shut and his lips curled in a sneer of disgust.

Always the criminal was caught. And why not? Any dolt who committed a murder and had the blundering stupidity to leave a tell-tale clue or to miscalculate some vital fragment of his scheme deserved to be caught.

The heavy lids shuttered over Wahl's eyes. A thoughtful smile tugged at his mouth. Take him for instance. Now if he decided to embark upon a criminal enterprise he would work out each detail with the precise exactitude of a scientist. All possibilities would be minutely examined and accounted for.

Immersed as he was in these vicarious reflections, Albert Wahl little realized how close he was at that moment to testing his theories.

The little bell attached to the front door tinkled. Wahl got up and went behind the counter. Surprise registered across the lean face at the sight of his visitor.

Dan Curtin was a big man, big and artificially pompous. His huge round skull was quite bald and even in that dim light the damp sheen of perspiration covering it was visible.

Wahl was puzzled. He couldn't imagine what Curtin might want. The big man was a partner in the town's leading jewelry store. Curtin & Avery.

Wahl rubbed his long bony fingers together and exposed his teeth in a smile.

"Good afternoon, Curtin. What can I do for you?"

The jeweler wasted no words. "I want some money, Wahl."

"That's my business. How much?"

"Five thousand—cash."

The loan broker harnessed the startled look that fought for expression upon his face. He pursed his lips. "That's a lot of money. I'm not sure—"

Curtin cut in with the impatience of a man anticipating the precise objection that might be raised to his request. "You'll get adequate security. I need the money for only one week and I'm willing to pay you an interest of ten percent." He smiled thinly. "Far more than the legal rate, I might add."

A DULL glitter entered Wahl's eyes. He made a rapid calculation. Five thousand at ten percent would net him a cool five hundred dollars. Not bad for one week's work.

Somewhat dubiously he said: "And the security?"

Curtin's face had the rigidity of a plaster mask. He reached into his pocket and took out a piece of tissue wrapping. He opened the paper and left it on the counter.

Albert Wahl caught his breath. He also caught his tongue, for he had been about to speak. This second reflex was instinctive because he was not aware even then why he kept silent.

He gazed down at the counter, his eyes tightly fastened to the glittering diamond brooch that rested in the center of the tissue paper. It contained possibly twenty stones set in platinum, twenty perfect blue-white gems that sparkled and shot forth a thousand facets of brilliant light.

"Is that good enough security for you?" Curtin's voice was patronizing, faintly sarcastic.

Purely for the effect Wahl found his magnifying glass and screwed it into his right eye. He lifted the brooch and angled it against the electric bulb, simulating careful scrutiny. The gesture was a needless one. He knew of this piece, knew its intrinsic value, and it was not hard to guess how Curtin had come into its possession.

It belonged to old Mrs. Prentice and it was worth a cool hundred thousand dollars. He looked up at Curtin.

"Five thousand?"

"Yes."

"For one week?"

"Maybe less."

Wahl nodded shortly, turned to the ancient Mosler behind him and knelt at the dials. He twisted it slowly, native caution planting him so that the numbers were hidden from Curtin's view. Left to twelve—then right to three—back left twice to eight. The bolt dropped with a muffled click. The door swung open. Albert Wahl reached inside.

He counted the bills out upon the counter. Curtin picked them up and fingered them into his wallet. Wahl rewrapped the brooch, tucked it back into the safe and locked the heavy steel door.

"I'll take a receipt," Curtin said. "With a description of the security."

Wordlessly, Wahl filled out a slip of paper and passed it over.

"One thing more," Curtin added. "No one is to know about this deal. It is strictly confidential. Understand?"

The loan broker nodded. "As you say."

Curtin crammed the receipt into his pocket, turned on his heel and departed.

Alone in his office, Albert Wahl retired again to the back room. For thirty minutes he sat motionless in his chair, staring at the cover of the mystery book.

It was like the slow fermentation of some rare wine, the thought processes that took place in his mind, the cerebration that finally led to his ultimate resolve. And that was to appropriate the Prentice brooch for his own.

Such an opportunity, to acquire vast wealth at one fell stroke, was offered to but few men, and then only once in a lifetime. A smart man, a man with initiative and foresight and a measure of daring would accept the opportunity and utilize it.

Wahl's heavy-lidded eyes were closed again, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. Old Mrs. Prentice, the owner of the brooch, was a widow, a silly, irresponsible woman whose husband had erred in bequeathing his money to her outright. She had squandered and wasted it in childish speculations. And then, only two days ago, close to the end of her resources, she had come into Wahl's office, offering to sell the brooch at half price.

OF COURSE he had not been in a position to buy it. Such a sum was more than he could raise, even for so certain an investment. So she had taken the glittering diamonds away and Wahl's greedy eyes had followed them in hopeless futility.

He could deduce what had occurred afterward. She had gone to Curtin & Avery's and asked Curtin to dispose of the brooch on commission.

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Since there was no one in town who might purchase the piece at a respectable price, Curtin had in all probability suggested that he be permitted to take it to some exclusive New York establishment.

Wahl could guess why Curtin needed the five thousand dollars. He had read about it in the local paper. Curtin was involved in a suburban real estate deal that had absorbed his ready supply of cash and probably needed this additional amount for the closing. To have put up some of the store's regular stock as security might have been discovered by Avery.

Although Fred Avery went to the store every day he did not stay late nor did he work very hard. It was common knowledge that Avery suffered from a severe cardiac ailment, so badly he was compelled to carry a ready store of adrenalin with him at all times.

This fact was important. It substantiated Wahl's belief that Avery had not been apprised about Mrs. Prentice's brooch, and that Curtin was taking advantage of the condition to raise this personal loan on what was really a partnership liability.

Wahl went back to the safe, opened it and took a .32 caliber automatic. He'd loaned money on it to some transient over ten years ago. He oiled the weapon, slipped some fresh shells into the clip and jacked it into the chamber. He took a Maxim silencer from a drawer and attached it to the muzzle.

Four hours later found Albert Wahl pressed into the shadows of a dark alley one half a block from the Curtin & Avery Jewelry Store. At seven sharp the lights went out. Business had stopped some time ago and the darkened streets were deserted. It was the dinner hour and scarcely anyone was left in the business section of the town.

A clerk came out of the store, turned right and headed home. Al-

most immediately Curtin himself emerged, turned left and came swiftly along the street.

Hearing the heavy footfalls, Wahl stiffened tensely. He inched toward the mouth of the alley. His fingers were like scraped bone around the gun butt. As the bulky figure came abreast of him he called out the name softly.

"Curtin—Dan Curtin—"

With a startled exclamation the jeweler halted dead and made a half turn. By the yellow light of an anemic street lamp he descried Wahl's thin face and saw the glint of gun metal.

Curtin must have known then what was going to happen. He must have realized that this could not be a simple holdup, not with Wahl presenting himself with such brazen openness. His mouth flapped open in a hoarse whisper.

"No—Wahl, no—"

And then his words were abruptly chopped short by the soft *plop* of the silenced gun as a crimson muzzle blast licked a sharp stabbing tongue of flame at him. He collapsed heavily, awkwardly, to the pavement.

Wahl stooped swiftly, reached for the wallet, snagged the five thousand dollars, then spun and raced back through the alley into the opposite street. Hugging the protective shadows of dark building fronts, he glided across town until the lighted windows of a residential section appeared.

Fred Avery's small house stood on the corner of Cedar and Willow. Wahl breathed more easily when he noticed that it was dark. Avery was probably napping. Wahl gained entrance through a rear window, and by the flickering glow of a match found himself in the dining room.

He took out the gun, meticulously wiped his prints from it and buried it deeply into a drawer in the large mahogany highboy.

IN LESS than thirty minutes Wahl was back in his own living quarters above the loan office. A strange

feeling of triumph had burgeoned and welled up inside him. Elation poured through every fibre of his body.

It was amazing, really, how every cog in his plan fitted together as if they had been tooled for that purpose. He rummaged inside the drawer of an old wooden filing cabinet until he found a square of brittle paper. He scanned it swiftly, and smug satisfaction suffused his face.

It was a three-year-old pistol permit. Fred Avery had got it from the police department and brought it to Wahl—that was when the loan office had been more of a pawn shop—and asked to buy a gun. Wahl didn't have a new one in stock, but he'd promised to get one. And then Avery'd had his first cardiac attack and had forgotten about the whole thing.

The law required Wahl to fill out a form whenever a firearm was sold and forward it to the police department. This Wahl did, taking it down and immediately posting it. They would receive it early the next morning. By that time Curtin's body would have been discovered. The cops would put two and two together, search Avery's house, find the gun, check it against the bullet that had killed Curtin, and Avery's goose would be cooked. . . .

It was not until ten o'clock the following morning that Chief Garson and one of his deputies called at the loan office.

"We're checking up on that gun you sold Fred Avery," Garson said.

"Oh, yes," Wahl nodded and brought out the permit. "Here's the permit you gave him. Can't understand why he waited so long."

Garson's eyes were direct. "Did you know that Dan Curtin was shot last night?"

Wahl feigned ignorance. "No!" he gasped. "Is—is he dead?"

"Very. Bullet took him right through the heart. This the gun you sold Avery?"

Wahl turned the proffered weapon over in his hands. "Why, yes, but it's not—it couldn't be the one—"

"That killed Dan Curtin? It is. There's no doubt about that."

"Good Lord!" whispered Wahl, dressing his face with shock. Then he frowned slightly. "Come to think of it, Avery did act kind of peculiar yesterday."

"When did he buy the gun?"

"Yesterday, in the afternoon, about four o'clock." That, Wahl knew, was when Avery usually left the store and walked slowly home.

Garson exchanged glances with his deputy. When his eyes again drilled back at Wahl they were hard and brittle. "Tell me, Wahl, why did you kill Dan Curtin? Was it so you could keep the diamond brooch whose receipt we found in his safe?"

Suddenly Wahl's pulse was beating wildly against his temples. His mouth was arid, dry as flint. "I—I don't understand—" *The receipt, he kept thinking, why had he forgotten about it? But it didn't prove he'd killed Curtin. They couldn't prove that.*

Garson's voice was like the crack of a whip. "You never sold this gun to Fred Avery yesterday at four o'clock. And he couldn't possibly have killed his partner. Here's something you didn't know, Wahl. Fred Avery got a heart attack at two in the afternoon and died one hour later in the hospital. I arrest you for the murder of—"

But Albert Wahl heard no more. There was a drumming in his ears and a swimming in his head. He had fainted.



Murderer's Playground

By David M. Norman



It was a great night for a murder—no moon, no stars, and a rich old eccentric, ripe for picking. And Sheriff Davis, who was no novice at spotting killer's clues, found himself up a tree when it came to reaping a homicide harvest.

HE WAS a big guy, that trooper in his slouch campaign hat. As big as his prisoner was diminutive. Sheriff Ted Davis arose from his desk to greet them. The

state trooper saluted him casually.

"I've brought you a package to wrap up." He flung the prisoner into a chair. "Caught this little rat snooping around that big estate about a

mile off the main highway. Spotted him heading toward it so I followed. Says he is just a bum, but I found this on him."

The trooper laid a wad of bills—about forty dollars in all—and a set of very good burglar tools on Sheriff Davis' desk.

Davis grunted and looked at the little crook. Then he glanced back at the trooper.

"You're new in these parts, officer—"

"Trooper Patrick, sheriff. Just assigned from the Payson Barracks. Heard a lot about you from the boys. They seem to think pretty well of your abilities, sir."

Davis grinned. "Thanks. Now about this crook here. You must have caught him casing the Dr. Montague estate and I know why he was doing it. Dr. Montague is an inventor. Made his pile some time ago and is practically retired now. He's a strange duck. Lives alone and is really a recluse. It's said that he keeps a lot of money hidden somewhere on his estate ever since he got a trimming when a bank closed."

Trooper Patrick whistled. "No wonder this little tramp was so furtive. Well, better lock him up on a charge of carrying burglar tools. That's about all we have on him."

Davis frowned. "Maybe we'll have more. Dr. Montague phoned me twice during the past week and complained of suspicious characters. Perhaps he saw this monkey and can identify him. I'll phone Montague."

But Davis had no luck there. Dr. Montague's phone was reported out of order. Davis got up, clamped handcuffs on the prisoner and took his arm.

"We'll take him up to Montague's place. Might stop the worthy doctor from calling me fancy names when I don't happen to get out there fast enough to land a prisoner of my own. You got a car, trooper?"

"Patrol car. Come on."

TWO minutes later they were rolling out of the small town and heading toward the hill country. Sheriff Davis questioned the prisoner and drew from him nothing more than a stream of curses and a savage struggling to get free.

Trooper Patrick turned his head slightly, keeping one eye on the road. "Davis, just what kind of a man is this Dr. Montague?"

"Some people call him a nut. Myself—I'm not so sure. He invented a lot of mighty useful things in his day. Came here about four years ago, bought a big house and lots of land. Then he built an iron fence around the property, ran charged wires from his house to the fence and he can turn it into a regular electric chair. Has all kinds of doodads—stuff he worked on for a hobby. I suppose you'll see."

They made a sharp turn and Patrick reduced the speed of his patrol car. The road became rutty and narrow. It was dusk and the trees which made an arched roof over the road, also kept out the remaining light of day. Patrick turned on the headlights.

Suddenly he jammed the brake on. Davis and the prisoner were thrown forward by the quick stop. Patrick jumped out of the car and ran up to a sprawled out form which lay just off the road. Davis grabbed his prisoner, yanked him out and approached the trooper.

Patrick looked up. "This man is dead—murdered. He's been shot, two or three bullets, squarely in the face. Shake up that little rat, Davis. Maybe he knows something about this."

"Me? Kill a guy?" the prisoner bleated. "Honest, I ain't killed nobody. I don't travel heeled. Okay—I was gonna try and get to that crazy inventor's dough. I'll take the rap for it, but not murder."

Davis said, "Patrick, will you hang onto our friend here? I'd like to examine the body. If it's anybody from these parts, I'll know him."

Patrick got up and grabbed the prisoner. "I'll give you odds you

won't, sheriff. You haven't seen the dead man's face yet. It just isn't there any more."

Davis knelt, turned a flashlight on the corpse and grimaced. Trooper Patrick was right. He carefully slid a hand into the pockets of the victim and drew out an assortment of articles. A flat thirty-two automatic was one of the items. Another was a government poster torn in half so that the pictures and physical description of a criminal known as Joe "Spats" Stafford, was missing. The rest of the poster indicated that he was wanted for robbery and murder. Davis glanced curiously at the dead man's feet. He wore grey spats.

"Look like somebody did society a favor," Davis grunted and showed Patrick the picture. "Can't identify the dead man's face, of course, but the spats he wears indicate he is this crook, Stafford. The notice says he always wears spats."

Patrick took the circular with both hands, forgetting all about the runt of a prisoner. Suddenly the little crook made a wild dive for the brush. He barged through it and disappeared. Patrick whipped out his service pistol.

"We'll head him off. You go to the right, I'll take the left, and we'll form one of those Nazi pincer movements. Maybe he knew Spats Stafford. Maybe he did kill him."

Davis plunged into the forest growths himself. He veered right and heard Patrick crashing through the brush to the left. Well ahead he could also hear the little crook as he floundered around. Davis grinned. He wouldn't get far. It takes a man well versed in forests to travel this difficult trail.

Davis shot the ray of his flash ahead of him. There was nothing to fear. The little crook had no gun. Davis skirted a small section of marshy ground. There was an explosion just behind him and a bullet zinged dangerously close to his ear. He shut off the flash and dropped flat.

Wriggling about, he held his gun ready and listened for sounds. None came. He raised himself, put the flash against a stone and turned on the switch. At the same moment he threw himself to one side.

NOTHING happened. Leaving the flash in place, he made a half circle and hoped to come at the would-be killer from the rear. He heard Trooper Patrick sing out that he'd caught the crook. Davis frowned. They were far to the left. The crook hadn't fired that shot. Who then had been hiding here, ready to murder? The killer of Spats Stafford? Probably. Davis picked up his flash and hurried back to the road. Patrick was there, clutching his prisoner firmly.

Davis said, "Did you search him, trooper? Somebody took a pot shot at me back there. Figured it was our prisoner, but I'm not so sure."

"I didn't shoot at you," the prisoner wailed. "Honest I didn't. I didn't have no roscoe."

"Shut up," Patrick growled. "Sheriff, I'm sure this runt didn't try to plug you. Must be somebody else loose in these woods. How close are we to Montague's place?"

"Very close," Davis said. "That's what worries me. I've heard of Spats Stafford, of course. Always used a gang on his jobs. Which means some of his own boys may have knocked him off and are now concentrating on getting Montague. I'll drive, because I know the road pretty well. You hang onto his nibs."

Davis sent the patrol car streaking toward a winding hill, at the top of which was Dr. Montague's elaborate place. Halfway up the hill, the headlights of the car picked out a huge, heavy gate. Davis stopped.

"Trooper," he said, "you'll now see what I mean about Montague having a lot of gadgets around. That gate is electrically charged. See the warning sign? Now watch."

Davis went up to the gate and carefully touched a button attached to

one post. Almost instantly, a small spotlight snapped on to cover Davis. He moved directly into its ray.

A metallic voice came from the top of a tree. "Well, sheriff, what do you want. Who is with you? I can see someone in that car—which is a State Police car too, not your own."

"I've got a trooper with me," Davis spoke loudly. "Also a prisoner he picked up. I want to see if you can identify him. Maybe we've cleaned up the prowler who's been haunting your place."

"Good," the voice snapped. "I'll open the gate."

Davis went back to the car where Trooper Patrick sat staring at the gate which was already opening slightly. Davis climbed into the car and chuckled.

"When I pushed the bell, Montague got the signal. By remote control he turned on the spotlight to illuminate me. Something like a television set hidden nearby, brought a picture of me to Montague. We conversed by radio—or maybe it's just plain telephone wires hooked to a sensitive mike."

The gate was all the way open now. Davis drove through and the gate closed behind him. A moment later they heard the yapping of dogs. Big, savage dogs by their sound.

"Any crook who tries to get onto Dr. Montague's estate has a good chance of winding up on a morgue slab—like Spats will. Those dogs can tear a man to bits. The fence can shock him to death and there are a few other pitfalls too, trooper. That's why I came along—to protect you."

Patrick wiped his forehead and grinned weakly. "I guess you're right. Say, has this Montague really got all that money he's reputed to have hidden up here?"

Davis shrugged. "Who knows? He always has plenty of cash on hand. Well, we're here. Take a look on the porch. That's Montague waiting for us."

DR. MONTAGUE was tall, white-haired and wore nose glasses. He was a man of slight build and seemed to be highly nervous. Davis marched the prisoner up to him.

Montague squinted at the man. "I never saw him before," he declared. "Two days ago I happened to be strolling near the limits of my estate. The dogs went wild and I turned on a flashlight. Got a glimpse of a prowler. Wasn't this man. How many are trying to get onto my property anyhow?"

Davis said, "Doctor, you didn't blaze away at the man you saw, by any chance? We found a dead man further down in the valley. Somebody had put two or three slugs through his face."

"I didn't shoot anyone," Montague declared. "A scientist doesn't have to use firearms to protect himself. Well, come into the house. I'm glad you came, sheriff. I'd like to have you stay the night with me. The trooper can lock your prisoner up."

"I'll stay if you wish," Davis answered, "but I think you're pretty well protected."

"Perhaps—but I'm sure there are several men trying to get through the fence. They're after something, but they won't get it. I worked hard so I could retire permanently, sheriff. I don't intend that some slimy murderer is going to kill me."

Trooper Patrick shoved his prisoner into the house. "The fact is, doctor," he said bluntly, "the man whose body we found happens to have been a pretty dangerous crook and killer known as Spats Stafford. He always traveled with a mob and I figure they killed him for some reason or other. Maybe to make the split of their loot that much smaller. I think it's best if you locked all the doors and windows. Have you a gun handy?"

"No gun," Montague declared. "I don't need one. But that's a good idea. There are many windows. Sheriff, will you help me lock them?"

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Davis nodded and spent five minutes making certain all the windows and doors were locked on the first and second floor. Montague bustled around on the third floor. Suddenly there was a shout from downstairs. A door banged. The dogs started their frantic howling again. Davis raced down the steps to find Trooper Patrick reeling toward the front door. There was a bruise on his temple and his gun holster was empty.

"Damn him," Patrick muttered. "He got my gun, whanged me on the head and escaped. We've got to get him, Davis. But we can't leave Montague alone. Give me your gun. I'll go after that rat. You take care of Montague."

Davis handed over his weapon somewhat reluctantly. Patrick seized it and hurried out into the night. Montague pounded down the steps, obviously in a state of great agitation.

Before he could say anything, a shot rang out. It was followed by two more. The last shots were louder, heavier, and Davis knew they came from his big gun. Davis rocked on the balls of his feet.

"Doctor," he said, "I'm going out there. Lock the door after me. Don't open it until you hear either my voice or the trooper's. Something may have happened to him. I've got to make sure."

Montague nodded and Davis sprinted into the night. He heard the door lock click. There were no signs of Patrick or the little crook. Davis snapped on the ray of his flash and wished to blazes he hadn't loaned his gun to the trooper. If Patrick were dead or wounded, and the crook loose, Davis was in serious danger too. He cursed the darkness and kept moving forward.

THEN Davis was strangely aware that the night seemed to have become even darker. He turned and looked over his shoulder. The house, every window of which had been

brightly illuminated, was now in total darkness. Davis' heart missed a beat.

That meant only one thing. The crooks had somehow succeeded in getting beyond the fence, located the dynamo house which furnished juice for the estate, and destroyed its mechanism. Now the fence was just a plain fence, easily scaled. Perhaps other safeguards which Montague had provided, were also disabled.

Davis stumbled through the gloom, hoping to find Patrick somewhere, but the trooper was apparently just as lost or befuddled. Twice, Davis snapped on his flashlight and then turned it off quickly. That ray just made a perfect target of himself.

Then, halfway down the path toward the main gate, Davis tripped and fell heavily. He tried to move his legs and found that they were lying across what seemed to be a log. He used the flash for an instant and gave a cry of fear. The log was a human body. The little crook whom Trooper Patrick had captured.

He was quite dead—with two bullets through his chest. One hand still clutched the gun he'd taken from Patrick. It was apparent that after he'd been hit, he had crawled some distance because there was a trail of blood across the grass.

Davis started moving fast up the sloping walk. He heard leather scrape against small stones, whirled and was just in time to check a savage attack. The man was invisible in the darkness and Davis' flash was knocked out of his hand during the first split second of the battle.

The attacker was big and powerful too. Davis ducked his head and bore in, carrying the fight to his enemy. That seemed to take the man off guard because he retreated several steps. But in the darkness, Davis couldn't see him draw a gun.

There was a roar, a flash of crimson flame. Davis doubled up, clutching at his arm. Feet scampered away. Davis swore softly, peeled off his coat and found that a bullet had passed



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through the fleshy part of his arm. He quickly tied this with a clean handkerchief.

"Davis!" Trooper Patrick was yelling from somewhere back near the house. "Sheriff, where the devil are you?"

Davis didn't reply. Perhaps the killer believed he'd settled him for good. At any rate, calling an answer would only have attracted the murderer again, and next time his aim might be just a trifle better.

Davis stumbled back down the path until he reached the body of the little crook. He picked up the big gun, forced it loose from the dead fingers and stuffed the weapon into his back pocket. He felt a little better now. Of course, the county coroner would have a few choice phrases to utter about a man who deliberately picked up evidence, but Davis was more concerned with saving his own life now.

Trooper Patrick met him as he approached the house. Patrick was nervous, worried.

"That shot," he exclaimed. "I thought our former prisoner had finished you off."

"Our former prisoner," Davis grunted, "is finished himself. Didn't you shoot it out with him?"

Patrick nodded. "Yes—he tried to waylay me and darn near blasted my head off. I fired back—twice. He dropped, but when I went to look for him, he was gone."

"You got him all right. Now let's go back into the house. Montague will be half frantic with worry. Patrick, the way things have been moving here, I think that several of Spats Stafford's mob are actually on the estate—beyond the fence. They've managed to cut off all juice too. Watch yourself—those monkeys are dangerous."

THEY returned to the house cautiously. Patrick, at Davis' suggestion, went to the door while Davis covered him. Montague let him in, once Patrick identified himself. Then

Davis scurried up the steps and into the house.

Montague was suffering from a bad case of nerves. "Both of you shouldn't have left me that way," he explained. "While you were gone, someone put out the lights, and if you'll go into my study you'll see a knife on the floor. It was thrown at me through an open window. I thought you locked all of them, Davis."

"I did," Davis said. "Never mind about that now. We're in a rather bad spot. Phone is out of order, no lights, and the estate probably full of gunmen just waiting for a chance to blast us out. There's no way to send for help and daylight won't benefit us much either. Just give those killers a better opportunity to finish their business."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Patrick said tensely. "Our only chance is to get away from here while it's still very dark. Can't tell but a moon will come out at any moment. Let's try for the car, hurry back to town and get plenty of help. I'll call the barracks for twenty men."

"I—I can't go," Montague sniffled. "It's quite impossible. They're here for just one thing and if I go away and leave it behind—"

"Take it with you," Patrick suggested. "There's no use beating around the bush, Dr. Montague. Everybody knows about all the cash you keep here. That's what those crooks are after. Let them get into the house and, believe me, you won't be able to take your money with you. Leave now and you will. There's no dishonor in retreat when you're outnumbered."

Montague licked his lips, started to pace the floor and stumbled against a chair he couldn't see in the darkness.

"What do you think, sheriff?" he asked.

Davis said, "Patrick is right. It's senseless to throw your life away trying to protect the results of all these years of work. Even if you can't possibly reach your cache and bring

the stuff along, it's better to save your life."

"All right," Montague said. "I'll—no, no, I won't do it. I won't run away and let someone else sate themselves on my property. We'll stay right here, in this room. All three of us. If they come, you men have guns."

Patrick turned to Davis and peered at him through the gloom. "It's up to you, sheriff. I just came along for the ride."



Davis rubbed his chin. "We might get away with it. There must be half a dozen men on the premises. Naturally, they will select their own good time to strike. If Dr. Montague refuses to leave then it's our job to stay here and protect him."

"Okay with me." Patrick fumbled around the room and sat down heavily. "I'm keeping a gun in my hand every minute, though. Best thing we can do is assign ourselves to certain positions in this room and



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not move from them. That way, if we see anybody walking around, we can blast away without worrying that one of us will be hit."

"I'll sit here. Right beside this table," Montague said. "Sheriff, you take that chair near the fireplace. Please, gentlemen, do your best to protect me. I'll see that you are repaid."

An utter silence came upon them then. Even the dogs were silent. It continued for several minutes, but the air was charged with terror. At any second those crooks might storm the house. They might even know exactly where Montague and his two guards were sitting.

DAVIS could hear Montague's labored breathing. Patrick sat, half across the room and barely visible. Several times the old house creaked dismally and each man gave a start of anticipation, but when the sound wasn't repeated, they relaxed. This business of waiting for death to strike was worse than actually fighting it out.

Then the silence was broken by a wild yell of pain and terror. Dr. Montague leaped up, took several rubbery-legged steps across the room and fell heavily. He began to moan.

Davis reached his side first and Trooper Patrick was no more than a second behind him. Davis started to turn the doctor into a more comfortable position and Montague gave another yell of pain.

"My back—near right shoulder. Knife—sticking in me. I'm sure it's a knife—"

Davis slowly passed a hand across Montague's back until it encountered the hilt of a dagger. The knife was driven into the soft, fleshy part of the shoulder about two inches deep. A nasty, painful, yet not very dangerous wound. Davis seized the haft and yanked the blade free to the accompaniment of another howl of anguish from Montague.

Patrick helped the inventor into a

chair. He said, in a low voice, "Do you still think we ought to stick it out, doctor? At least one of those crooks must be inside the house. Maybe the whole bunch are here."

Montague shivered. "We must go—at once. Staying here will only result in my being killed. But first, I am going to bring something with me. I—must go after it—alone."

"You won't stir unless one of us is with you," Davis grunted. "Patrick, you stay here and keep your ears and eyes open. Warn us if you hear anything or spot those monkeys. Doctor, lead the way. You know this house. I'm not asking to see the place where you hide your money."

"But it isn't—" Montague began.

Davis cut him off. "Don't waste time. Go to wherever you have it hidden. If you wish, I'll turn my back while you uncover the stuff. Only get started, all our lives are in danger."

Montague tottered out of the room. Patrick took up a position in the front hallway, beside the door. Davis followed the inventor up the wide staircase, along a corridor, and finally Montague opened a door with a key. Instantly, the odors of a laboratory assailed Davis' nostrils. Montague proceeded directly to what seemed to be a long table, running the length of the big room. Outside the dogs barked briefly.

Montague could only use one arm because the other was practically crippled. He hauled a fairly large wooden box into the center of the lab bench, fussed with it and finally Davis heard the lid close. Montague tried to lift the box and failed.

Davis brushed him aside, tucked the box under one arm and finally had to use both hands to carry it. The thing weighed about fifty pounds. They moved toward the staircase. Montague clung to the railing. He was weak from loss of blood.

SUDDENLY the house was flooded with light. For a moment or two neither Davis nor Montague could

see anything. Then Davis made out the form of Trooper Patrick standing at the foot of the steps. Davis' own gun was in the trooper's fist and it was pointed ominously upwards.

"Come on down, you hick copper," Patrick rasped. "And bring baby with you. Yeah, the baby you're holding like it's nice and heavy. Montague—if you even faint, so help me, I'll drill you."

Davis didn't move. "What's the idea, trooper?" he queried.

"The idea is I'm no trooper. I'm Spats Stafford and did I put one over on you, sheriff! You'll never live it down, if I decide to let you live. The six guys you thought were prowling around, was only me. I did a good job, eh? Had to do it this way. Getting through that gate or over the fence was impossible. I had to find a method by which the gate would open for me. You took care of that, sheriff. You and my pal, the runt."

Davis came down the rest of the way and still stood there, holding the heavy box.

"The body along the road was that of the real trooper then. You killed him—purposely disfigured him so I wouldn't be able to recognize the man. The little crook you pretended to arrest was only a stall so I'd take both of you here. You attacked me at the scene of the state trooper's murder. You did it again after I found the runt's corpse. But you were careful not to kill me or Montague might have got so scared he'd never tell you where his money was hidden. Why did you kill the runt, Spats?"

The crook laughed. "Why not? He'd have come into half of the swag. A guy has to look out for himself. Now let's see about this. If I don't knock both of you off, I can't carry that box and still keep the drop on you. Well, I guess—"

"I'll carry the damned box," Davis said.

"Yeah, that's great. Okay, Montague. I should put a slug through your head, but after all, you got to-

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gether this dough on which I'm going to live. Just step into that closet. I'll lock you up. That's better than being plugged."

Montague tottered toward the closet and went inside. The crook laughed, turned the key and left it in the door. Then he gestured with his gun and Davis walked out of the house carrying that heavy box. The crook kept the business end of his gun pointed at the sheriff's back.

Davis said, "Just what do you intend to do, Spats? I know you don't mean to allow either Dr. Montague or myself to live. No one knows I came here. No one can trace these crimes to you."

The crook chuckled. "You're a pretty smart bird, sheriff. Yep—too smart, so I'll give it to you, cold. I was going to make you carry the box to my car. I don't like hard work, but I guess I can do it this once—for the pay I'll get. So you take a bullet through the back of the head. I'll return to the house and set the place on fire. Just before it starts burning good, I'll toss you and the runt inside. Wipe out all traces of the crime, except for the trooper and nobody will guess why he was knocked off. Put the box down, sheriff."

DAVIS found his throat dry, his forehead growing moist. He said, "Give me a break and I'll tell you how to double the value of what this box contains."

"Okay," the crook agreed much too hastily. "Spill it."

"Only half of Montague's stuff is in the box. I know where the rest happens to be and you don't. In fact, he left most of his money behind and filled the box full of jewels. Fake jewels—the results of three years work up here. He was trying to manufacture gems suitable for industrial use, by artificial means. A fence wouldn't give you much for them."

The crook gasped, gestured with his gun. Davis moved back. Spats kept a wary eye on him, knelt beside

the box and fumbled with the catch. He threw the lid open. A cloud of thick brown fumes rose up to engulf him. He gave a wild yell of terror that became a choking sob. He straightened up, waving his arms to dissipate the fumes.

Then a gun was pressed firmly against the nape of his neck and Sheriff Davis spoke in a quiet voice.

"Drop the gun, Spats. Your runt of a pal took your gun, remember? It was all for show to help scare Montague into going after his money. But the gun is loaded and if you make a move, I'll shoot."

"Sheriff—" the crook rubbed his eyes and shivered—"what was in that box? It must have been poison gas. My eyes—I can't see. My face is burning. Don't let me die."

Davis laughed. "You won't die until they make it a formal occasion at the state prison. Like a lot of other people you believed too much in general talk. Montague has money, but it's in a New York bank. He hemmed himself in with all these devices because he was working on a liquid which is easily converted into a gas. It's meant to make war more humane, by blinding the enemies temporarily. Looks like the stuff works too."

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"You're lying," the crook wailed. "I had you fooled. You couldn't set a trap for me."

"Ah—but I could. In the first place no state trooper would have let a handcuffed prisoner get away from him twice unless he wanted that to happen. Then there were Dr. Montague's dogs. Every time we went around the estate, they yapped their

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heads off. Luckily he had them tied up. But when we were waiting for the non-existent gang to strike, the dogs never let a yap out of them. I knew, when Montague was hit by that knife, that you'd thrown it. No one could have approached the place without arousing the dogs.

"Then too, while Montague and I were upstairs, you went outside to patch the light wire together. The dogs yapped again. Your whole idea was to convince Montague and myself of the fact that a gang was surrounding the house. You threw the first knife at him, but you opened the window from inside before your pal faked his getaway. And in the darkened room it was you who threw the second knife that got Montague in the shoulder. You made a regular murder's playground of the estate."

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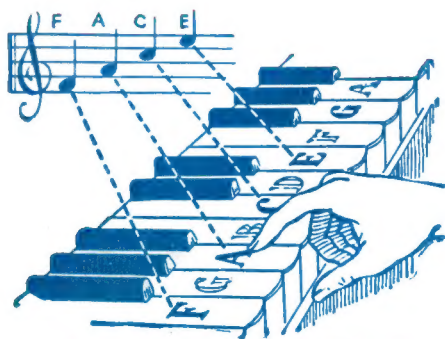
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